

Salt and Light – February 5, 2017 – Matthew 5:13-20

This morning I want to talk about salt. Salt is a pretty helpful resource. We use it mainly for its flavor, but back before refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative. Back in the first century, salt was sometimes used as currency, and it was highly valued as an item of trade. Salt was also used in some surprising ways. According to theologian Ronald Allen, salt “in ancient times was rubbed on newborn children, used to seal covenants, sprinkled on sacrifices, and understood as a metaphor for wisdom.” (from *The Lectionary Commentary*)

Because of the importance of salt, perhaps it is not so surprising that Jesus used it as a metaphor for discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we saw how Jesus began his message to his followers by blessing them. This week we see how Jesus begins to teach those who had gathered around him, not only his chosen disciples, but also the crowds who had shown great interest in his message.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus tells them who they are and what they are to do. He gives them identity and purpose. These are perhaps the two questions that all humans strive to answer throughout their lives – who am I and what is my purpose in life? We wrestle with those questions in an attempt to make sense out of this world. We struggle with them, and how we answer them has a tremendous impact on our lives. Some people go through their lives never figuring them out.

The people who had gathered on the side of the mountain that day saw something in Jesus. Something that struck a chord within them and they wanted to know more. And so Jesus answered these questions using simple images to lay the foundation for what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

Who am I? You are the salt of the earth. What is my purpose? You are the light of the world. Notice how Jesus phrased those statements. He did not say, you should attempt to be like salt or you should strive to be like light. He is emphasizing that they already are these things. By choosing to follow him, they have already taken the first step in claiming both their identity and purpose. But then he takes it a step further.

First there is salt. Jesus asks, if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? One of the side effects of certain prescription drugs is the distortion or loss of one’s ability to taste. The properties within the medication somehow cause problems with that particular sense. Just like some medicines can cause ringing in the ears, loss of appetite, or numbness in the fingers and toes, our sense of taste can be distorted. Whether the taste buds are altered or the medicine causes a foreign taste in the mouth, either way, the ability to taste food is greatly impaired. For those who have experienced this while on certain medications, it can be quite frustrating. You bite into a piece of food, something you’ve eaten any number of times, and you know what that food is supposed to taste like. But it doesn’t. It tastes wrong.

And that’s the image I get when Jesus describes salt that has lost its saltiness. It is simply wrong. By its nature, salt is salty. And if salt loses its inherent quality of saltiness, then it is

worthless. Now in the first century, there were different grades of salt. This is because there were oftentimes fillers mixed in with the sodium chloride. So depending upon how much filler was in the mix, compared to the actual salt, it would certainly change its function, taste, and effectiveness.

Do you remember a few years back when a fast food chain came under fire because their chicken nuggets were not entirely made up of meat? And then there was a study published by the *American Journal of Medicine* on chicken nuggets at various fast food restaurants. It was discovered that the chicken nuggets were about 50% chicken meat; the rest was a tasty assortment of ground up other parts of the chicken.

(<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/02/06/272112028/oh-so-thats-what-goes-into-a-mcdonalds-chicken-mcnugget>)

Meatless chicken nuggets. Unsalty salt.

Jesus says, salt that has lost its saltiness is worthless and should be thrown out. Purge the worthless. They were no longer good for anything but taking up space. If we unpack this metaphor in relation to discipleship, here is what we have. A disciple of Jesus has some specific innate qualities. A disciple lives a certain way, using Jesus as the model and living in accordance with the purposes and expectations of God's kingdom.

Yet if a disciple is diluted by worldly fillers, then he or she will not be of much use to the Kingdom. The world beckons us to follow its values and to put greater importance on the things of this world. Worldly pursuits do not mix well with discipleship. A disciple that lives according to flawed priorities of this world is not much of a disciple. To be a salty disciple is to follow Jesus without a bunch of filler getting in the way of who we are called to be.

In addition to our identity as a disciple, Jesus describes the function of a disciple. He says, you are the light of the world. Again like the image of salt, light has a rather simple and basic nature. When light exists, other things are illuminated. Comedian Ellen Degeneres once quipped, "In the beginning there was nothing. God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light. There was still nothing...but you could see it a whole lot better."

The character of light by its very nature is the antithesis of darkness. The tiniest bit of light can make all the difference. Here's a story: A cave heard a voice calling to it, "Come up into the light... come and see the sunshine." The cave replied, "I don't know what you mean; there isn't anything here but darkness." Finally the cave ventured forth, and it was surprised to see light all around. Then the cave said, "Come into my cave and see the darkness," but when the sun went into the cave, there was no darkness. (from Lindy Black's lectionary website)

Jesus gets this point across when he shares examples of how light is used. A city up on top of a hill is exposed and cannot be hidden. In the home, when someone lights a lamp it's for the purpose of illuminating the room. The person would not then attempt to hide the light by

covering it up. Instead they would put it up on the lamp stand so it could function properly, providing light to the house.

In the same way, you who are light, let your light shine in this world. Let others be bathed in that light. Let your good works, let what you do, point others to God. The light that we have as disciples of Jesus comes from God. So when we function as disciples, when we bring the light of Jesus Christ to other people, those people get a glimpse of God. When we bring the good news of God's kingdom to others, the light of the gospel interrupts the darkness. This light could easily be called hope. In Jesus Christ we have found hope, and to those who are surrounded by darkness, the light of hope is a welcome respite to the challenges of the world.

So just as it would be foolish to cover up a lamp in your home, thus stifling its true purpose, a disciple who hides the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is equally foolish. Similarly, a church that focuses completely inward, caring only for its members, has hidden the light of Christ. Christian writer C.S. Lewis once said, "The church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became a Man for no other purpose."

If we want to fulfill our purpose, to share this light, this hope that we have, with those who are living in darkness, then we need to be willing to seek out the darkness. Of course it's much easier to stay safe and secure and hang around others who are also light bearers, but then the light gets wasted.

Sometimes when I am working in my office early in the morning, I have to turn on the overhead light. As the time passes and the sun eventually rises, natural light begins to stream into the room. At some point, I will look up and notice that the ceiling light is still on. So I get up and flip the switch off, because it is no longer doing anything but wasting energy.

In this early part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to teach his disciples and those who have followed him because they want to learn more. He shares with them what it means to be a disciple. He reveals their identity and their purpose, using simple but powerful metaphors. So too for us. We also have chosen to follow Jesus Christ as his disciples. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. Let us live up to that which Christ has called us.