

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
February 6, 2011

Salt and Light  
Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

The lectionary has us in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5, 6, & 7. Last week, we took a look at the Beatitudes, Jesus' announcement of some wonderful news, so wonderful that it may seem unrealistic. The Beatitudes turn the world's values upside down with their shocking promise of hope to the hopeless and power to the powerless.

Following this, Jesus continues his sermon by using two images to describe to his disciples who they are: "You [*plural*] are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You [*plural*] are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Notice that “disciples of Jesus are not *urged to* be salt and light: they are *defined* as being salt and light.”<sup>1</sup> It is, as with last week's Beatitudes, “sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning.”<sup>2</sup>

It's interesting that salt and light are contrasts: one is hidden; the other is visible. You can't easily see salt when it's added to food, but you can certainly taste it, and it helps to preserve food. Light, on the other hand, doesn't do any good if it's hidden. Jesus wants our light to shine so that others may find God's path.

Jesus ends this section of his sermon by talking about the law and prophets. For the Jewish people, the law is a blessing and a gift from God. But what about for Christians – how do they view the law now that the new covenant in Jesus Christ has occurred? Is the law left intact or replaced with something new? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers another option. As Fred Craddock states, “The law neither remains as it is nor is it done away with; rather, it is fulfilled and transformed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus hasn't come to abolish the law or the prophets. But now, each and every commandment is seen in the light of Christian faith.

We should note that the text doesn't say that the scribes and the Pharisees will not enter into the kingdom of heaven, even though some

---

<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through The Christian Year* (Year A), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, *Working Preacher*, 2/6/11.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 53.

Christians have understood this text in that way. Scribes were experts in the sacred texts, while Pharisees were a lay group concerned primarily with interpreting and obeying the law of Moses. These two groups “were the persons most conscientiously committed to observance of the law. For Jesus to mention them was to say that his disciples were to exceed the best, not the worst.”<sup>4</sup>

Let’s take a closer look at what it means to be salt and light. First, salt. When Jesus tells his disciples to “be salt,” he’s drawing on a number of Old Testament uses for salt. It was used for seasoning, preservation, and purifying (2 Kg. 2:19-22). We may not be able to see the salt in our food, but we notice when it’s missing.

There’s an old story about a king who had three daughters. He wondered how much they loved him. The oldest said that she loved him more than all the gold in the world. The king was impressed. The second daughter said she loved her father more than all the silver in the world. That pleased him, too. The youngest said, “I love you more than salt.” He was disappointed to hear that and banished her from his sight. The castle cook overheard the conversation and decided to do something in defense of the youngest girl. The next day she left out all the salt in the king's food. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Craddock, p. 108.

food was tasteless. Then he knew what his daughter was saying to him. She loved him so much that without him, like salt missing in food, nothing was good.

We need to take care, though, in being salt of the earth, that we not be *too* salty. Can Christians be too salty? Can we get or give too much religion? Can we be too "spiritual" or "pious"? Indeed, we can get too much of the wrong kind of religion. Salt is essential for life, but too much salt in our food is distasteful. Too much salt may cause high blood pressure. As Christians, we don't want to force our faith onto others. We're to follow Jesus' example – he always preserved people's freedom to walk away from him.

On the one hand, too much salt can be harmful. On the other hand, salt that has lost its saltiness is worthless. As the salt of the earth, we're to keep our tang, because salt that has lost its saltiness is worthless. Tony Robinson notes, "Our task, as the people of God, is to provide an alternative, a contrast model to the world. In order to do that we must be true to our God-given identity and vocation, being salt or light and not losing our saltiness or hiding our light. But this identity is a missional one, to be in service to the world. Be yourself, be salt, don't lose your saltiness."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Robinson, Common Reading, Jan. 31, 2011.

The second image Jesus gives is light. He says, “Let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.”

To tell you the truth, I find it a bit strange that this verse is placed here, so soon after Jesus teaches the crowd, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Can we be humble and let our light shine at the same time? And frankly, I’ve always had problems with the kind of Christians who take this verse as their motto and try to live it out. Listen to it again: Let *your* light shine before others so they may *see* your good works and give glory to God in heaven.

I don’t know how that strikes you, but it strikes me as an invitation to act “holier-than-thou.” To present my moral virtues in such a way that I draw lots of attention to myself.

Now I know, the text actually says, “Let your light shine before others *so that they may give glory to God*” but in a way, that can be worse. I’m reminded of so many athletes who “give all the glory to God for granting them the power to score the winning goal,” as if God has any interest in who wins the game. I don’t want to see any of that in today’s Super Bowl. It’s irritating when you hear things like that, and you just want to squash them for saying it.

Maybe the best way to understand this text is to keep it in balance with the other gospels. Perhaps it can act as a counterbalance to a bias from the Gospel of Luke that's often found in my theology.

There's something about Luke that really appeals to me. I like the God who welcomes prodigals home with a fatted calf. I like the God who justifies sinful tax collectors in the temple. "I love the God of the second chance, the God of the extra mile, the God who knows my frame and remembers that I am dust and knows my brokenness, and welcomes even sinners like me to the table." (Long) I love the God of Luke's Gospel.

Maybe this text from Matthew works best as a corrective to the cheap grace we confer on ourselves if we are familiar only with Luke's Gospel. As one commentator notes, "There are too many Christians whose lives do not match their profession, who have heard the gospel but are slow to do what Jesus said." (Hare, 31). Maybe we need to hear the word from Matthew that says to us, "Look, you know what's right, you know what's wrong, now behave like you know. Be righteous. Just do it."

But there's a surprise. This text comes to us on the Sermon on the Mount, which is a declaration that a **strange new righteousness** has come into the world: "You have heard it said, but I say unto you..."

The truth is, we don't *really* know what's good, and we don't *really* know what's bad, at least not at first. "Before we know how to show light, we have to seek light." (Long)

Tom Long tells a story: Back in 1849 there was a Presbyterian student who graduated from seminary. He was a very promising student, and he wanted to become a great preacher. And he had gifts, the faculty said. The church agreed - he was called to a very promising church in the brand new city of St. Louis. St. Louis was a bustling city at the time, the gateway to the west. He was called to build a great cathedral church, and he went, full of hope and promise.

As soon as he got to the city, however, there was an outbreak of cholera, and instead of commerce and promise, it was a city of disease and death. His family in the Carolinas wrote to him, "Come on home, there are churches here that can use your gifts." And there was a moment of moral uncertainty. This was not what he had imagined.

And he had to decide, was he going to be righteous? Or was he going to be *righteous*? He wrote home: "If I am to bear witness to the true Jesus Christ, I must stay here among the suffering." And he who thought he would be preaching to the multitudes found himself wandering from ward to ward, bed to bed, touching fevered brows and praying with the dying.

Finally, the disease took him, too. It was a few days after his 25th birthday. And on his tombstone in St. Louis it reads: “Presbyterian minister William Patton. In the gloom of our night, he was the light of Jesus Christ. And now he lies awaiting the great dawn.”

Before we can show the light, we have to pray for the light. And when we are given the light, then, we must let our light shine, so that others may see our surprising works and know they are surrounded by the mystery and love of God. Amen.