

Salt and Light
 FCCOE, Feb 12, 2023
 Matthew 5:13-16
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Salt and light picks up right after beatitudes. SM Matt 5-7. Jesus makes absolutely clear to his disciples – us today – that we must be very very visible in the world, putting His love into practice so that other people will see it and it will grab their attention.

You are supposed to be out there 24 7 doing His work so that your deeds are seen by other people and they draw their attention and they give glory to God. You draw people's attention by living Jesus' love so that it bounces off you and ultimately results in giving glory to God.

See this small section in larger context

- SM, Mt 5-7
- Beatitudes – Tim has been preaching
- Beatitudes describe who we ARE as disciples. (examples)
- Now the sermon goes on – since He's told us who we are, now he tells us what we do.
- Salt and Light – two big metaphors – begin the long section (rest of the SM) on our action.
- Being/doing, character/action, identity/activity.

When you read this passage, it is really quite startling. Jesus the SOG says to you and me – you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world. Now the SM was given to the disciples, and if you read carefully at the beginning and end, you see that there were crowds around. So maybe a couple of hundred people. To them he said “you are the salt of the EARTH. You are the light of the WORLD.” A huge expectation, given without apology. Jesus expects His disciples, you and me, to change the world for the better.

What do salt and light do? Among other things, salt brings out flavor in food. It brings out the best in food. We, if we live as his disciples, visibly doing his work on this planet, we bring out the best in other people.

You are the light of the world. Light dispels darkness. It clarifies, it protects, it gives life. If we are out there very visibly living Jesus' love, grabbing people's attention, and therefore causing them give praise to the Father in heaven, we are the light of the world in other people's lives.

Again, Jesus makes clear that this must be really big. Two images. The city on a hill. Ancient city of Hippos – one of the 10 cities of the Decapolis. Jesus could see it from 10 miles. Visible 360 degrees. Lamp on a stand. You don't light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. You put it on a lampstand so that it gives light to everyone in the house. You have to be out there all the

time, very visibly doing his good deeds, so they can see these good works and be drawn themselves to God.

I will state the obvious – you can do with your life whatever you want. You can live anyway you choose. We've been given the life of Christ, but in how we live we are completely free. In fact, Jesus alludes to this fact – not alludes, but he puts it right out there. Salt can lose its flavor. It can be completely de-salted so as to become useless.

Now what I discovered after reading on this passage, Sodium chloride is actually a very stable compound – we use it as salt exactly as it comes out of the earth and it is very stable. The only way it can be changed – the only way it can lose its saltiness is by being adulterated. It can be contaminated by mixing it with other impurities and then it becomes forever useless. Good only for road dust.

You can in fact take a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. Lamps of Jesus' day were flames that depended on oxygen, so if you put a lamp under a bushel basket, it was going to go out. You, if you make the choice not to be out there, actively living Jesus' love, actively doing good deeds that will attract other's attention and possibly lead them to glorify God, we can lose our flavor. We can lose our light.

It can happen. Jesus teaches that in this passage. It does happen. I am sick and tired of Christians, particularly in the church, who have lost their flavor as salt. I am frustrated and tired of seeing people in the church who have been given this light by Jesus, and put it under a bushel basket and all they do is spread the darkness. Those who do not shine forth the characteristics of the beatitudes; whose good virtues implanted by the Holy Spirit have been contaminated – quite apart from drawing people to glorify God they actually drive people away.

And I tell you I am not immune. When I find myself drifting in those directions, I am disgusted. When I am salt losing its flavor, when I am light under a bushel basket, I am choosing mediocrity. I am choosing to waste God's gifts and completely sidetracking the good God wants to do in the world through me as energized by the Holy Spirit.

So, Christian. You are a child of God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. You will be comforted. You will inherit the earth, you will be filled with righteousness, and because of these things you are merciful, you are pure of heart. You are a peacemaker.

Go out and live as salt and light in the world. Do visible good works, and the greater glory of God will be extended.

Most of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is a further explanation of what it means to live as salt and light. Tim is going to pick up with the next section this week and you are going to see that Jesus gets very concrete about what this life looks like – when you are angry, when you have

an adversary. How you have trusting, committed relationships, how you have straight, reliable speech – your yes is a yes and your no is a no. And so on, pretty much for the next 2.5 chapters.

David Brooks has a very thoughtful editorial this week called *How Do You Serve a Friend In Despair?* Thursday NYT. He reflects on his lifelong friendship with Peter Marks, his closest friend. They first met each other at summer camp when they were 11 years old – served together as counselors, and stayed close all through their adult years. Peter Marks became a successful eye surgeon, but as Brooks writes, about 4 years ago started to sink into what became a deep, dark depression. Aware of what was happening, Peter Marks asked Brooks and his wife for their continued friendship and support.

Brooks very candidly admits that this was a request he had no idea how to fulfil. “How do you serve a friend who is hit with this illness?” he writes. He tried as best he could, but tragically Pete succumbed to suicide last April.

In his reflection David Brooks writes about everything he tried that did not work. He tried to give him advice, he tried to remind him of the many blessings of his life and family, he tried to cheer him up. None of those not only didn’t work, Brooks says. They only made matters worse. He uses the words futility and impotence to describe his feelings.

He writes the editorial 10 months after his friend’s death. Ten months in which he thought about what a friend can do for someone in deep depression. Ten months later he writes:

If I’m ever in a similar situation again, I’ll know that you don’t have to try to coax somebody out of depression. It’s enough to show that you are trying to understand what this troubled soul is enduring. It’s enough to create an atmosphere in which the sufferer can share her experience. It’s enough to offer him or her the comfort of being seen.

Brooks goes on:

I wish I had bombarded Pete with more small touches. Just small emails to let him know how much he was on my mind. Then he cites someone who wrote in *The Atlantic* last year about his own depression. The author said that his brother sent him over 700 postcards over the years, from all 50 states, Central America, Canada and Asia. Those kinds of touches say: I’m with you. No response necessary.

Why do I bring this up? Because as I was preparing this sermon, and read this editorial, I realized that David Brooks was writing about his efforts to, and his advice to us, about how to be salt and light. Right there in the NYT.

Your assignment this week is to think of someone in your world who needs a touch, who needs their friend. You might know someone like Peter Marks in deep depression, or it might be someone who is just lonely. Your assignment is to reach out. Will you take it? You don’t have to do much. Jesus says later in this gospel that even if you give a cup of cold water to someone else it is doing God’s work. God notices and God will be in that interaction.

Working on this passage this Thursday and reading Brooks' article moved me to call my cousin Steve. Steve was not a close cousin growing up – he was several years younger and one of the ones we call the nyah nyahs. I haven't seen him for at least 10 years, but a year ago he had a stage 4 cancer diagnosis. He'd had extensive surgery, followed by chemotherapy, and he's doing very well. He's in the small percentage with his kind of cancer that has a good chance of beating it.

So I dialed the number I had for him and he answered on the first ring. We had a wonderful conversation. I got the low down on his cancer, his wife and kids, his work, his outlook. He talked very freely about what it was like to face the prospect of death, and what it was like now to have the prospect of living several more years. It was a wonderful conversation from his standpoint and mine. We agreed to do it again.

A simple phone call. Who is going to be yours?

Let me finish with another story about someone choosing to be salt and light. My wife came across this as she's preparing a talk on the spiritual formation of children. It has to do with a little girl named Marion who rides the bus to school every day. She is being bullied on the bus by another 3rd grader named Mildred. Mildred had failed first grade so she was older and bigger than Marion. Marion was small, so Mildred evidently just selected her as Enemy #1. Marion's mom finds out about this bullying situation and finally convinces her daughter to sob the whole story out to her. Marion makes her mother promise not to say anything.

Marion's mom thinks about it and what she should do. Pause. She realizes she has several convictions. First, God cares about the problems in our lives, even little 3rd grader's lives. Second, God loves both the lovable people and the unlovable people. Third, love is the strongest instrument of change in the world.

Marion's mom prays with her daughter about her problem with Mildred, and then carefully takes her action. This is a true story, so I'll read to you what happened – this was written years later by Marion herself – the adult Marion Bond West remembering this incident from her childhood.

At the bus stop one day, Mother stooped down to Mildred's level. She didn't say anything at first. Instead, she rapidly buttoned Mildred's coat and turned the collar up around her neck. Then she fastened back this stubborn piece of hair that forever hung in Mildred's face.

I stood off to one side watching our breath linger in front of our faces in the frigid morning air, praying that no students would happen by and that my mother's plan would be over quickly.

"I'm Marion's mother. I need your help, Mildred." Mildred looked intently at my mother with an expression I couldn't identify. Their faces were inches apart. My mother's gloved hands held Mildred's cold ones as she spoke. "Marion doesn't have any brothers or sisters. She sort of needs a special best friend at school. Someone to walk up the hill with her after you get off the bus. You look like you'd be a fine friend for her. Would you be Marion's friend, Mildred? Mildred chewed on her bottom lip, blinking all the time, and then nodded.

“Oh, thank you,” Mama said with certain confidence and gratitude. Then she hugged Mildred long and hard. She gave me a quick hug and called to us as though nothing unusual had happened. Mildred and I walked onto the bus, stiffly, like mechanical dolls, both staring straight ahead without speaking.

We continued use that bus stop, and Mildred would walk home with me. Pretty soon we were talking and laughing. Mildred started tying her hair back the way Mama had. My Mom would sometime include treats for Mildred in my lunchbox.

I didn't understand my Mother's plan back then but when Mildred sent me a real store-bought Valentine I knew my Mother's plan had worked.”

This story had a great ending because Marion's mother had convictions about how we are supposed to relate to the world. Salt and light kind of convictions. And she spread that salt, and that salt changed a little girl's life and maybe changed the kind of adult that girl became.

What if Marion's mother had not acted as salt and light? What if she heard that her kid was being bullied and thought: My job as a parent is to protect my child no matter what. Children from bad families need to be avoided. The school people should do something about this bully.

If those were her reactions, then instead of getting down on Mildred's level and engaging her with love, she would have gone to the Principal of the school and lodged a complaint. Called up Mildred's mother and told her to control her child. Seen to it that Marion's class was changed, driven her to school instead of taking the bus. A bushel basket over the light. Salt turned into road dust.

And what would that have taught Marion? How to perpetuate hostility. How to further live out the destructive mantra of me first at all costs, self interest above the interests of others, hostile division between the good guys and the bad guys. She would have taught her exactly how NOT to be a Christian.

Hear it again – You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Lifted high on a lampstand, shining as brightly as a city on a hill.