

You Is Salt

Text:

Matthew 5:13-20

A sermon preached by

James F. McIntire

© Copyright 2014
James F. McIntire
All rights reserved.

February 9, 2014

5th Sunday after Epiphany



Hope United Methodist Church

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org

Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net

Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus said:] “You 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. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.



You ... are ... the ... salt ... of ... the ... earth.

Like seawater, our bodies contain salt: a tear, a drop of blood, a bead of sweat. Without salt our hearts would not beat, blood would not flow, and muscles would not work properly. Before birth a baby develops in a saline solution. Accident victims may receive a salt solution intravenously. In Roman times salt was so precious that it was used, at least in part, to pay workers so that the word "salary" comes from the Latin *salarium*, a word for salt. A person not worth his or her salt is one not worthy of wages. Every year Americans use eighty-five million tons of salt for their food and

chemical industries.

You ... are ... the ... light ... of ... the ... world.

Light illuminates, reflects, deflects. Light comes in many colors, it travels at very high speed, can be natural or human-made. Light can be bright or dull. Light allows us to function even in the pitch blackness of midnight so that we don't stumble and get hurt and as our ancient ancestors knew so keenly, to avoid being attacked by wild animals. We need light just as much as plants do. We need light for our internal body clocks to work correctly, to regulate when it's time to sleep and when it's time to wake up and to prevent depression and illness.

You ... are ... the ... salt ... of ... the ... earth.

So, Jesus to be the salt of the earth I have to do what? I have to be useful. Not just useful, I guess, but absolutely essential. I have to be seasoning in this bland world. I have to be valuable and desirable otherwise people just toss me over their shoulder wishing for something better to happen. I have to be worthy of my place in world so that I bring value to my life.

You ... are ... the ... light ... of ... the ... world.

And, Jesus, to be the light of the world I have to be how? I have to be illuminating. I have to shine brightly into the darkest corners of a dark world. I have to provide security and safety to those around me. I have to help others be less depressed and stop them from stumbling. I have to be that which delights the senses and shines the way.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

We are tempted to hear these words as requirements from Jesus about how to live a life worthy of God's love. We hear Jesus' words more like "If you *want to* become salt and light, do this...." or "*before I'll call* you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you...." But that's not at all what Jesus says here in what we've named the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says quite simply and directly, "You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world."

Of course Jesus goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness is useless and that light wasn't made to be put under a bushel. But are those realities that we are to avoid – the loss of our saltiness, the temptation to hide our light in the darkness? Or are they statements that should make us chuckle because they are impossible?

The last time I studied this text I began to realize that salt can never really lose its saltiness. When mixed with water, it makes the water salty; when left out and uncovered the saltiness doesn't evaporate; if it's crushed it becomes powder, but still salty; even when mixed with another chemical it doesn't lose its saltiness.

Are candles ever put under bushel baskets? Once it loses oxygen isn't a flame no longer light but simply a burnt wick? Or under a basket doesn't it start a fire and become heat and energy more than just light?

Maybe Jesus is just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light in order to underscore the reliability and resilience of what God has given us, the indestructible power that we inherently have and are because God has created us in this way.

"You *are* the salt of the earth!" Period. "You *are* the light of the world." Period. "That's the way it is and that's the way it will stay." Period.

And Jesus here is talking to people who knew what it was like to be disregarded, discarded, disrespected. He was talking to peasants in 1st century Palestine, depressed, oppressed, repressed by Rome. He was talking to people that never heard a positive word about themselves, people that were never called valuable, never told that they were as essential as salt and light.

Yet that's what Jesus tells them about themselves.

Kathryn Stockett's novel, *The Help*, set in Jackson, Mississippi, is about life in the 1950s American South portraying the interaction between middle class White folk and their African American household "help." Aibileen is the central character who works for the Leefort family who, in addition to caring for household duties, also has a deep relationship with their young daughter, Mae Mobley, who she calls "Baby Girl." Aibileen sees Mae Mobley being emotionally hurt by her mother's inattention and self-absorption so she takes it upon herself to offer a mantra to the little girl – what is arguably the most famous line of the book and the movie which followed. She would say to Mae Mobley over and over again: "**You is kind. You is smart. You is important.**"

Psychologists suggest that for every negative message elementary-aged children hear about themselves, they need to hear ten positive ones to restore their sense of self-esteem to where it had been previously. I don't know if there is research to back it up but I suspect that that number increases tremendously for adolescents and teens. And the maybe it comes back down to a 10:1 ratio when we reach adulthood. We all need to hear many, many more positive statements to balance out the negative.

Children become what they are named. Call a child bad long enough, and he or she will believe you and act bad. Call a child or a teen or an adult worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she will live into that adjective. In the same way,

call us good or useful, dependable, helpful, or worthwhile, and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well

“You are the salt of the earth,” says Jesus, “You are the light of the world.”

“You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the salt of the earth.”
“You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the salt of the earth.”

How many times do we have to hear it before we believe it?

“You are the light of the world.” “You are the light of the world.”
“You are the light of the world.” “You are the light of the world.”

How many times? Seventy times seven?

“You is salt. You is light. You is important.”

Jesus said it to peasants. Jesus says it to us.

Heidi Russell Rafferty maintains a website and blog called Christian Safehouse, a virtual place to receive prayer and support. Being reminded of this same exchange from *The Help* she writes of her son:

This morning, it occurred to me to ingrain the words into Neil, to help his self-esteem. He's 8 and was recently diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. He struggles with social acceptance by his peers and occasionally is bullied. I thought that when I told him to repeat the words to me, he would react like the little girl in the movie. We sat in the shade of an ancient oak tree on the corner where we meet his school bus. "Neil," I said in the quiet of the morning, "I want you to repeat these words to me. Now look me in the eye." He put down the small toy with which he was playing in his lap and fixed

his eyes on my face. "You are good." Neil immediately grabbed the top of his head with his arms and covered his ears. "Neil. Neil. You are kind." Neil ducked his head into his chest. "Neil, listen. Neil. You are smart." Neil shook his head violently and started to cry. "Neil, look at me. Look at me. Take your arms off of your head and look at me." It took me about 3 minutes to convince him to put his arms down and stare at me again. Tears covered his face. "Neil, don't you believe those three things?" He shook his head. "Has anyone told you differently?" He nodded. "Who?" He named children from school, one by one. "Neil, listen to me. They're lying. They are telling lies about you. You are not dumb. You are not stupid. You are not bad. You are not mean. You are good. You are kind. You are smart. You are good. You are kind. You are smart." He stared at me. He shook his head no again. "Do you know who also thinks you're good, kind and smart? God does. God loves you. You're his special boy. You are good. You are kind. You are smart. Don't believe people when they tell lies to you about you. Those are lies. Those are lies." As Neil got onto the school bus, my heart broke for my child. I had no idea that all of this time, he was hearing bad things about himself from others and was believing them – actually believing them. It got me thinking ... how many of us believe lies about ourselves? How many of us don't fully pursue the love that God has to offer because we think we're not deserving of it? The truth is that we don't do anything to deserve God's love, but we are God's creation, God's children. And [God] created us to be good, to be kind, to have value – to be loved.

“You are salt. You are light. You are worthy. You are loved.”

We have a hard time believing that about ourselves, don't we? Or maybe I should say sometimes – most times, maybe – I have a hard time believing that about myself. Maybe you're salt and light, sure, but not me. Maybe you are worthy and loved, but not me. Maybe Jesus was talking to you. But me? Not so much.

What if you were to start a "Salt & Light Log?" I read about this idea online. Start collecting examples throughout the week where God has worked through you to help someone else. Write down those moments when you are the seasoning in someone else's life. Jot down those times when you catch yourself shining brightness into another life.

I suspect you won't. But I'm making the suggestion anyway. And maybe take it one more step forward. Write in your Salt & Light log when you have received salt and light *from someone else*. When has someone been that catalyst in your life, has been light along your darkened path. Or write down when you've experienced someone doing that *for another person* – when you see someone else being salt or light.

Even if you don't write it down – since most of us have forgotten how to write anyway – make a mental note, send yourself a text, post it on Facebook. But please, please, please look and see this week – make it a Valentine's Day gift to yourself – look and see where God is using you as salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.”

“You is salt. You is light. You is loved.”

Amen.