

February 5, 2017  
Isaiah 58:1-10  
Matthew 5:13-20

Being Salt and Light

Jesus doesn't waste any time. In his Sermon on the Mount, he gets right down to business, challenging us with his teachings. He doesn't waste any time, flipping assumptions, turning ideas about God on their heads, saying 'blessed are' to those who are not ordinarily blessed. He doesn't waste any time, saying that we are part of that blessing, that we make a difference. We are the salt and the light for the world, he says. Beacons of hope, indispensable seasonings, he calls us. You are important, Jesus says. What you do and how you live matters. And this is just the beginning of Jesus' instructions for us. He isn't wasting any time.

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

Maybe you hear Jesus' words today and you feel a little bit unnerved.

Like me, you feel a little uncomfortable, Me, light to the world? Me, salt for the earth? Me, having extraordinary righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees? I'm sorry, but maybe you haven't met me Jesus. Hello, I'm Mary and I'm Presbyterian and talking about me being important and being salt and light and having great righteousness and good works;

it makes me feel weird. And unPresbyterian. Theologically speaking, Jesus, faith isn't about us, you know. It's not about me and the good things I do, because I might as well be worshiping myself then, right Jesus? I am pretty sure that I took a whole class in seminary about not doing that and not discussing my good deeds even if they are really good. Because God is good. God is great. God is source of all life and light. God is the one we should always be talking about. But today Jesus, is talking about us. About us being salt and light. About our actions making a difference; about how we show others that love is real, that there is reason to hope, that there is a power greater than any other power in this world.

Jesus is telling us, his disciples: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Your righteousness must be greater than that of the Pharisees. I feel theologically uncomfortable and then spiritually uncomfortable because it sounds impossible. Because most days, I don't feel like a light in the world. I am not always a ray of sunshine. I am not a delicious flavoring in the bland buffet of life. I can be grouchy. I can be impatient. I can be unkind and unmotivated. And unwilling to give

someone a break. Or think the best of my neighbor. Or forgive the person who honked at me at the gas station. Or share things like my coveted Jarlsberg cheese spread. I know that I'm not always that great. And Jesus must know that. So how can he tell me that I am salt or light for the world?

It seems impossible. That's my first reaction to what Jesus says today. Maybe you feel that way too. Maybe you aren't quite sure you can be that kind of disciple. Maybe Jesus needs someone better or nicer or more faithful. Someone with more time or more energy or more experience. Someone who might do better as the salt and the light for the world. But, Jesus insists, 'No, it's you. YOU are the salt of the earth. YOU are the light in the world. As my followers, this is what you do. You will shine. You will illuminate and fortify. You will clarify and give flavor. YOU, you will be a counterpoint and a contrast to life as it is in the world. You will reveal life as it could be, as it should be, in the Kingdom of God. You, as my disciples, are salt and light.

Jesus has such confidence in us. Though it seems impossible. It probably felt impossible to Jesus' first disciples too. They probably wondered

how they would be salt and light. They had no power in their lives under Rome's military occupation. There was little they could do. They were not the religious elite or the politically powerful. They were just fishermen and farmers and housewives and widows. They were the uninfluential and the small and the poor and the meek. They were ordinary. There was not much they could do. But Jesus says, 'You are my disciples. You ARE salt and light. You ARE, not you will be. Or you can be. Or you might be if you work hard and keep at it. No, right now, today, you ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world. Right now, this is how you must think of yourselves. This is what you must believe: that you are people making a difference every day.

We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world, Jesus says.

We make a difference as his disciples. So our next questions for Jesus are, how and why and when? What does it mean to be salt and light in the world? How do we do this? What should it look? These are questions we should ask. They are questions the church should ask. Because it changes from age to age and day to day. And today, being salt and light will look different than it did for his first disciples. Today making a

difference can be very public thing. We have more ways of making our voice heard than ever before. And Jesus is silent about what to post on our facebook page or what letters we should be writing or what protests to attend or what signs to put in our yards; Jesus doesn't have much to say about all of that. So we are left to wonder about how to live now as people of salt and light. But I want to suggest today that Jesus give us two guidelines; two instructions about how to be people who make a difference.

The first has to do with those images of salt and light. They are unique images. Light is about illumination and truth; and shining in the dark, it about radiating hope so others can see. And salt is about preserving things. And enhancing things and making things taste better for others.

Both salt and light are necessary and they are necessary for those around us. That's the first point. Salt and light do not exist for themselves. Light does not shine for itself, it shines for others. Salt is not salty for itself, it imparts flavor for others. Jesus does not say, you are the light that shines for yourself. He says: You are the light OF THE WORLD. He does not say you are the salt of your own business. You are the salt OF THE

EARTH. As Jesus' disciples, we do not live for ourselves. Life is not just about us anymore. It's not about personal fulfillment and my relationship with my Savior. Life is now a life for the sake of others. It is a self-giving life, like the life that Jesus led. Because he came to give us life. He came, not for his own good, or for his own righteousness, or for his own sake. But for our sake. For the sake of the world. So for the sake of the world, we are salt and light.

So what does that look like for us? What does it mean to live lives for the sake of others in our time and our place? That leads to the second point from Jesus' teaching. Jesus has told us where to start. He has just told us in the Beatitudes who God pays attention to and therefore, who we should pay attention to. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek and the merciful and the pure in heart. And those who are grieving. And those who are persecuted. And those who long for peace; those who need righteousness so badly they can taste it. These people have God's heart. When we live out that blessing and declare that favor from God for those folks, we are salt and light.

For the least and the last and the lost. For the sake of the world, for the sake of God's Kingdom, for the sake of a greater righteousness, be salt and light. Be better than those who just do good enough for God. That's what Jesus is saying to us today. And it has been God's message and God's story all along. In our reading from Isaiah this morning, we find Isaiah says the same thing. That God's people are to be a light. They are to make a difference. They are to loose the bonds of oppression, satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Isaiah says, Share your bread and your shelter and your clothes. Be different. Be better than good enough. Do more than just practice a religion, says Isaiah. Be the people of God. Be righteous. Bless those who are not blessed. Be good to those who don't have it so good. And your light will shine in the darkness. You will be the light God made you to be. The light you were meant to be.

We are meant to be salt and light. We are meant to proclaim God's blessing for all the earth. As salt, maybe sometimes we will irritate people. As light, maybe sometimes we will get in people's eyes. But we are not hide ourselves under a bushel. We are not to be flavorless and bland. We are disciples of Jesus, citizens of God's kingdom. And every

day, we live to bless those whom Jesus blesses. We live into Isaiah's righteousness that looks out for the weak and the weary. We live to be salt and light for others, for the struggling neighbor. For the stranger from a war-torn land. For the child who goes to school hungry. For the young person who feels invisible. For those cursed by poverty or addiction. For the earth cursed by our pollution and neglect. We are to bless and to serve.

We are salt and light. Called to make a difference. Called to notice the need for blessing around us and communicate that blessing. Like we do with the Community Garden and Meals on Wheels. The weekend Backpack Program. I am always amazed by the people who do the weekend backpacks. Fran and Judy and John and Cecelia and Jerry and the girl scouts and Zeb Henry and Sam. They are so many dedicated people who shop every week and organize the food every week and pack the bags every week for kids at Northside elementary who don't have enough to eat on the weekends. I feel so inspired by all these people doing things for others. So I suggested to Zeb Henry for his birthday that instead of asking his friends to bring presents, he ask them to bring food



for the backpacks. Instead of more toys, which I don't think our house can handle, how about crackers and oatmeal and fruit for others? Zeb Henry said ok. He was a good sport. But one of his friend's parents wrote to me and told me how touched she was by the idea. She said; In this day and age, "it is reassuring that there are good people in the world who help those in need."

And I thought, yes it is. And that's why we are here. That's what the church is about and that's how we follow Jesus. We are salt and light. However we can be in our ordinary lives. We are salt and light for those who need to know they are blessed, that things can be different. For the poor and the meek and the merciful and the pure in heart. For those who mourn. For those who are persecuted. For those who long for peace; for those who need righteousness so badly they can taste it. For the kids in our youth group. For those who come to the Garden. For those seeking a welcome and a place to belong. For our neighbors. For our families. For one another.

Here at this table, here with Jesus, Jesus makes a difference for us. He gives his life for us. He gives his life for the world. So the world may

again be blessed. And we are the salt and light that bear witness to that.

That love is real, that there is reason to hope, that there is a power greater than any other power in this world.

Ask: How can I be salt and light?