

Jim Gill

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"Salt and Light"

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12) Matthew 5:13-16 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16)

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 58:1-9A

Israel has strictly followed the law regarding fasting, but God seems not to take notice because they were pursuing their own interests, quarreling and fighting and oppressing others. God prefers they fast from those activities. Hear the word of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 5:13-16

In Matthew's account of the "Sermon on the Mount," immediately after Jesus lays out his "blessed be" Beatitudes, he lifts up two metaphors of how disciples of the kingdom will be known to this world. They will be the "salt of the earth," they will be the "light of the world." Hear the word of the Lord from Matthew 5:13-16

Let us pray. O Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Illumine these words of yours to point the way you call us to live and the difference you expect us to make in our world. As we meditate on these challenging words, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight our Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

It was the first day of class at the University. The teacher came in and welcomed the students and said, "Now I want to lay down some ground rules. First, since no one has the truth, you should be open-minded to the opinions of your fellow students."

At that point a young lady named Elizabeth raised her hand. She asked, "If nobody has the truth, isn't that a good reason for me not to listen to my fellow students? After all, if nobody has the truth why should I waste my time listening to other people and their opinions? What would be the point? Only if somebody has the truth does it make sense to be open-minded, don't you agree?"

The teacher said, "No, I don't. Are you claiming to know the truth? Isn't that a little bit arrogant and dogmatic?"

"Not at all. I think it is dogmatic and arrogant to assert that there is not one person on earth who knows the truth. After all, have you met every person in the world and quizzed them exhaustively? If not, then how do you know? In fact, I believe it's the absolute opposite of arrogance to say that I will alter my opinions to fit the truth whenever and wherever I find it. If I happen to think that I have a good reason to believe I know the truth, and would like to share it with you, why won't you listen to me? Why would you automatically discredit my opinion before it is even spoken? I thought we were supposed to listen to everybody's opinion?"

The teacher in a fit of frustration said, "Well, this is going to prove to be an interesting semester." Elizabeth said, "Ain't that the truth?" 1

This week I was at my Alma Mater in Austin-- no not UT but APTS-Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary for Mid-Winter Lectures. I seem to remember that on one of the buildings at the UT campus they record the second half of one of Jesus' sayings on one of the buildings. It says, "The Truth shall set you free." That's the second half of Jesus' statement. Jesus full statement was, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." I guess there wasn't room to carve the whole quote in stone, but I believe we really need the whole quote. We need to continue in God's word to know the truth...then the truth we learn there will make us free. Truth alone will not make you free. Being Jesus' disciples and getting in his word is what will make us free. If you are a criminal, the truth will lock you up. Sometimes, unfortunately, even if you are not a criminal a lie will lock you up.

This week at the Midwinter lectures we heard a lot of truth being proclaimed. We heard Jill Duffield the editor of Presbyterian Outlook preach twice. We heard Dr. Ted A. Smith, professor of preaching at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. We heard Dr. Donyelle McCray, assistant professor of homiletics at Yale Divinity School, who also has a Law degree from Harvard and a Doctorate of Theology from Duke Divinity School. We heard Dr. Jerry Andrews, the pastor of First Presbyterian in San Diego, who has degrees from Princeton, The University of Pittsburgh and the University of Chicago.

They were all fascinating. What captured my imagination was a lecture delivered by the pastor from San Diego on Gregory, who not only saved Rome from physical destruction but after finishing his training as a Benedictine monk was elected to serve as Pope. He was the first and only Pope who was a monk first. His Benedictine training gave him a deep spirituality that he brought to his position. The lecturer shared that Gregory training started by his memorizing the Psalms, then the gospels, then Isaiah, which he called the fourth gospel. Now that is what I call "continuing in the word." Now that is knowing the truth. That is being made free to serve.

Think about the crowd to whom Jesus delivered this sermon we started reading last Sunday with the Beatitudes. Those to whom Jesus was speaking didn't have any theology degrees. It wasn't a gathering of the United Nations; it wasn't the Congress or a Parliament, or even a City Council. It was a crowd on a hillside in a tiny spot of land called Palestine. It was a group of common people living common ordinary lives. They were under occupation; they couldn't make their own laws; they couldn't plan their own futures; they couldn't determine their own destinies; yet Jesus unloaded some truth on them when he said, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world!"

In the ancient world salt was a valuable commodity, not uncommonly used as a bartering agent. Some workers were paid with salt. The word "salary" is derived from the word, "salt." Persons wanting to buy something in the ancient world would pay for it with salt, in the same way we use money today. People treasured salt as we might value gold or silver. Today, if we think someone has done a good job we might say, "He's worth his salt."

Salt was such a valuable commodity because it was used to preserve food in the days before refrigeration. Today, persons who butcher their own meat often use salt to preserve it. Salt was also used as an antiseptic to clean out wounds. This sounds painful, but cleaning out a wound with salt was very effective in fighting infection. Today, we think of using salt in a wound as adding on something that caused additional pain. "That's like adding salt to the wound." It hurts, but sometimes, hurts heal.

In Jesus's day salt was not pure salt like we have today, but was harvested with other natural substances that could and did go bad. It was full of impurities, and if it was stored in a damp place, the moisture leached away the sodium chloride, leaving only the worthless residue to be tossed out on the road. When that happened, the salt was useless. There was no way to restore the lost taste. "But if salt has lost its taste," Jesus said, "how can its saltiness be restored?" The only thing to do with such salt is to throw it away. It is no longer valuable; it is worthless. "It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

Our identity in Jesus is primary, and if we weaken and lose our identity, then we forfeit our mission; we become, as he said using the strongest language, foolish and dumb. If read literally in Greek, the second phrase in verse 13 is not but if the salt has lost its taste but if the salt "has become a moron!" It's clear from the punch line that Jesus is not speaking about salt but people! In our calling to be the salt of the earth we are to preserve the earth and heal the earth.

Secondly, Jesus also declared to his followers, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill is seen for miles in all directions. Jesus was instructing his followers to allow their light to shine in a dark world so folks could find their way home. Once home, light was a luxury. Their homes were generally dark. They usually had one small window. Their light consisted of a lamp which was a bowl filled with oil that had a wick. The most difficult part of having this light in the house was of course lighting the lamp. Remember they didn't have matches or lighters. They had flint or 2 sticks to rub together. As a result, no one wanted to let their light go out because it took too much work to light the wick again. However, when people went out of the house it was dangerous to leave the lamp burning. So, for safety reasons, when they left their homes the lamp would be taken from its lamp stand and placed under an earthen vessel where it could burn risk free. As soon as someone returned to the house, they would return the light to its stand so it could shine to its maximum.

Light does not just banish darkness and illuminate corners and crevices, light also works to provide a new perspective. Light can put our experiences and perceptions into "a new light." To be a disciple of Jesus, of the kingdom of God, is not just to be a focused beam of light. To be the "light" that Jesus challenged his disciples to be also means to continually put a new light, a new perspective, on all the world, to willingly "change up" the "game plans," the "paradigms," that we are used to living by every day.

I read a story of a business executive who left his office late one night. He was tired, hungry, and thought maybe he'll just get some sleep on the train while in route to his home. Two stops into his journey, a father with two young children comes into his train

car. The children proceed to run up and down the aisle, making a lot of noise and disturbing everyone. Sleep was not possible.

At first, the businessman fumes silently in his seat. Then the anger builds and he becomes so irritated at the father for not controlling his children that he gets out of his seat and accosts him.

"You really should teach your children better manners. Besides, it is not just a matter of behaving badly; it is not safe while the train is careening down the tracks to have them running up and down the aisles."

The father took the criticism in stride and replied sheepishly, "I'm sorry. You are right. I should be insisting they behave better, especially in public. But we've just come from the hospital, where their mother has died suddenly tonight. And the children are in a state of shock, and don't know how to react. In fact, I don't know how to react, so I'm not on top of things right now like I should be. I'm sorry, sir. Thanks for waking me up to my responsibility."

In a flash, everything changed. The businessman shifted from being angry and annoyed to being sympathetic and helpful. He saw his immediate reality in a "new light." Suddenly that very weary commuter train-traveler was seeing someone the way Jesus saw everyone—the way Jesus sees everyone—the way Jesus sees refugees—the way Jesus sees you and me.

The light Jesus calls his disciples to shine out into the world is a light that also illuminates sin and suffering. It is a light that knows judgment, yet offers love. It is a light that sees deserved condemnation, yet extends the commitment of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness. It is a light that shines to reveal the truth.

John Stott, from Great Britain and a leading Reformed theologian, has these challenging words to say to the church today. He writes, "You know what your own country is like. I'm a visitor, and I wouldn't presume to speak about America. But I know what Great Britain is like. I know something about the growing dishonesty, corruption, immorality, violence, pornography, the diminishing respect for human life.

Whose fault is it? Let me put it like this: If meat goes bad, there is no sense in blaming the meat. That is what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. The question to ask is, "Where is the salt?" If the house is dark at night, there is no sense in blaming the house. That's what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is, "Where is the light?" If society becomes corrupt like stinking fish or a dark night, there's no sense in blaming society. That's what happens when fallen human society is left to itself and human evil is unrestrained and unchecked. The question to ask is "Where is the church?" (2)

Today marks the 74th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Dorchester and the heroism demonstrated by four chaplains who were credited with the saving of more than 200

lives. These four — a Jewish Rabbi, a Roman Catholic Priest and two Protestant Ministers — calmly issued life belts to American servicemen aboard the troop transport after it was torpedoed on Feb. 3, 1943. When the supply of life preservers was exhausted, the four Chaplains removed their own life belts and gave them to four soldiers and then stood calmly on the sinking ship, their arms around one another's shoulders and their heads bowed in prayer. There was the church. There a rabbi, a priest and two pastors died living out the Sermon on the Mount. They were salt and light

Two Sundays ago I told you about Detective Luzette Watkins who spoke at our Men's Breakfast. She was a first responder on duty on September 11, 2001 when New York City was attacked. This last Wednesday she talked a man out of jumping off the Hartman Bridge. Salt of the Earth.

This morning we are blessed to have Josh and Barbara Higginbotham with us in worship after 3 years of fighting an infection that has kept him in bed. Light of the World.

Like those that heard Jesus' declaration that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we are called to actively respond to the words they heard and follow their example and go into our world to be salt that adds flavor to a world losing its sense of what is in good taste, to a world that need healing of wounds, to a world that needs preserving. We are called to be light to a world that needs new light to shine to dispel the darkness, to a world that needs new light to be shed on the needs we can meet and the sins we can combat to bring reconciliation and restoration. We may not memorize the Psalms and the Gospels and Isaiah, but we can take it on ourselves to be Jesus' disciples by continuing in his word so that we will know the truth and the will make us free—free to be-- salt and light.

Let us pray. Lord, may we be salt to those who have lost the sense of good taste. May we work to preserve the goodness you have instilled in the world and to clean and the wounds that we have inflicted. May we be light to those who have lost their way or only known darkness because of our hiding our light under a steeple. Help us to believe what you believe we can do through the power of your Holy Spirit and the strength that comes from pulling together with one another. May our witness ring true as we face the world. Save us from shrinking when we meet the slick arguments of the defenders of the status quo. Be behind us when we become fearful and our footsteps lag.

Lord, as we go forth to serve you let our days reflect the brightness of your light that breaks forth like the dawn. Use us to loosen the fetters of injustice upon those oppressed by poverty, harassment, or abuse. Let us take their yoke upon us that we may share in their burden and lighten their load. Give us the goodness to divide our plenty with those who are hungry. We thank you for the blessing we have received and dedicate the food and money we have brought for the Souper Bowl of Caring this morning. May hunger be curbed and may it prompt a hunger for your word that will bring truth that brings freedom. Free us from our love of goods and comforts so that we can take the risks and endure the rigors of service to a needy world.

1. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by James Merritt
2. The Salt of the Earth, John Stott, adapted by Adrian Dieleman, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.

This morning we re-commission 6 lay chaplains who have committed themselves in service to the Lord and to this church. Will you please come forward when I call your name.

Debby Duffy
Betty Dugat
Cynthia Oliphant
Joyce Parker
Ann Reilly
Diane Woodcox

Mike Wilson and Barbara Wilson are not able to be with us this morning.