

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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2.9.20

Stay Salty and Shine Your Light

Today we continue exploring some of Jesus' most important teachings that we find in his Sermon on the Mount.

Last week we explored the Beatitudes. The word beatitude just means that you are in a state of supreme blessedness. Jesus' audience is his disciples and a crowd. They all had one thing in common - They were a rag-tag group of poor folks who were on the underside of their culture. And Jesus said to them, Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake.

These teachings are strange and counterintuitive. Many think the people in this world who are blessed by God are the rich and powerful and that the poor and weak are cursed by God. But Jesus flips that understanding around in his beatitudes. He says, "Hey, if you are having a hard time, if you are poor and you are mourning and it feels like the whole world is turning against you, God hasn't cursed you. God hasn't turned against you. In fact, God is with you." That's the radical flip that Jesus makes in our understanding of God.

And today's section from the sermon on the mount continues in this direction.

Because Jesus begins by saying, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

How many of you, when you heard Sharon read those words from Jesus, gave a little sarcastic chuckle and thought, "Salt and light? Ha! Not me."

How many of you thought, "Yeah, that pretty much sums me up!"

Well, you might need to work on a little humility...

The first time that I heard the phrase "salt of the earth" was when I around 13. My dad just finished a phone conversation with one of my aunts. This aunt is kind-hearted, warm, loves to smile and joke, and she volunteers at their local homeless shelter. I mean, come on! She and I played hours of card games like Uno and Phase 10 when I was growing up. My aunt continues to be a fun and highly moral person.

When my dad hung up the phone, I asked him how the conversation went, and he replied, "She is the salt of the earth."

And in that moment I thought, "Wow, I want to be like that! I want to be the salt of the earth, too!"

But as time went on, I ran into a problem. Namely, I kept acting like a jerk! Sometimes I would do and say mean things to my family and friends. I virtually ignored the poor kids at my school. At that time I used derogatory language that today I feel shameful about. I frequently acted in ways that were un-saltlike. And as your pastor, maybe I shouldn't admit this to you, but I'm only marginally better some 30 years later as an adult. In many ways, I fall short of being the salt of the earth that was presented to me in my childhood.

But maybe, according to Jesus, being salt and light of the earth isn't really about morals or trying really hard to be good.

There are a few points about salt and light that I want to make. Basically, in our world today, we primarily use salt to add flavor to food. Some of us like more salt on our food. For example, when my extended family goes to a fast-food restaurant and we order french fries, a particular person will take a bottle of salt and virtually pour the whole thing out on the fries, and in a moment when I'm admittedly a little judgmental, the thought runs through my head, "I think those fries have enough salt on them!"

But in the ancient world, when Jesus lived and taught, salt was used for so many more things than flavoring. In a time before refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative. And, even more to the point, salt in the ancient world was scarce and extremely valuable. Poor folks generally couldn't afford salt. Soldiers in ancient Rome were often paid in salt. Even as late as the American war of 1812, the US government was so poor that it paid soldiers with salt.

And then there's light. Yes, light is very helpful in order to see and walk around. In the ancient world where there were no flashlights or electric lamps, light was crucial and valuable. Light was often used as a metaphor for specific people who were thought to be important. It was generally only political rulers - kings, pharaohs, and emperors - who were called "the light of the world."

And so Jesus says, "You are the salt and light of the earth." Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't, "In order to be the salt and light of the earth, you first need to do X, Y, and Z." Rather, Jesus makes a pronouncement. You already are the salt and light of the earth. We take salt and light for granted today. We all have flashlights on our cell phones! And salt is so common that, without even paying for it, you can reach across the table at any restaurant and shake it all over your food.

But for Jesus' audience, salt and light were extremely valuable. And so when Jesus says, "You are the salt and light of the earth," he is saying that you already are extremely valuable. When he says you are the light of the world, he's saying, "Yeah, you know our political leader likes to be flattered and given important titles like the light of the world. But don't pay any attention to them. If you really want to see the light of the world, look to your neighbor. Because in each other you will find the light of the world."

Now, do we make mistakes? Are there times we don't live into our saltiness or let our light shine? Are there times when we get in a bad mood and act in unsalty ways? Yes, of course, but at our core, we are still salt and light. We are still valuable.

Here's my evidence. Jesus said to his disciples that they are the salt and light of the earth. But as you read the Gospels, the disciples act in questionable ways that are not always consistent with being salt and light.

For example, Jesus frequently tells parables to his disciples. Parables are stories with multiple messages. Jesus tells a parable about plants that were not planted by God and so they start to wither away. Jesus tells his disciples that they should just leave those plants alone because they will wither away by themselves.

Well, one of Jesus' closest disciples, a man named Peter, asked Jesus to explain the parable to them. I think this is a pretty understandable request by Peter. But Jesus responded by asking Peter in return, "Are you still so dull?"

Sometimes people ask me what my favorite Bible verse is. I need to tell you, I have a new one. Matthew 15:16. "Are you still so dull?" Make that your life verse. Put that on your refrigerator and stitch that into your pillows at home. Tattoo Matthew 15:16 on your arm. "Are you still so dull?"

Have you ever heard one of your pastor's sermons and afterward thought, "What was he talking about?" That's probably because your pastor was totally confused, not because you are dull. But sometimes you might have heard someone else say something and you thought, "Wow! I can barely scratch the surface of what that means!" The disciples were the same way, only probably much worse. They just didn't understand Jesus.

Later in the Gospels, Jesus began to teach his disciples that he was going to the cross. He saw that his ministry, that was a nonviolent subversion of the political and religious establishments of his day, would likely lead to his death. Immediately after opening up to his disciples about his painful future, his disciples responded to his emotional pain by getting into an argument about which one of them is the greatest. Talk about missing the point!

And on another occasion when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to the cross, Peter promised that he would follow Jesus wherever he went, even if he was going to die on the cross. But Peter failed to follow Jesus to the cross. Instead, he denied knowing Jesus three times. In fact, the Gospels tell us that all of the disciples cowardly abandoned Jesus in his time of desperate need.

The Gospels present the disciples as dull guys who were prone to rivalries and who abandoned their great teacher. They are not portrayed as great heroes, but as failures. But here's what I find so fascinating about them. The disciples were the ones who told others the story that became the written Gospels. They didn't wash over their dullness or their rivalries or the truth that they abandoned Jesus. They told the unvarnished truth about themselves and their failures.

What does this have to do with Jesus' pronouncement that his disciples were the salt and light of the earth? Jesus pronounced that his disciples were salt and light, but they often failed to live into their saltiness and into their light.

And so apparently, being salt has little to do with being heroic, or extremely moral, or bright, or really good people. You are not the salt and light of the earth because you are really good people, but because you are loved by God.

Is there anyone here who can identify with the disciples? Is there anyone here who has a lot of questions and doubts about Jesus or religion? Is there anyone here who has abandoned or betrayed a friend? Is there anyone here who is struggling with what the right moral decision might be right now in your life?

You are not alone. The disciples were the same way. And everyone here in this sanctuary is either going through a similar struggle or has gone through a similar struggle in the past. And we will all go through those struggles in the future.

If I were one of the disciples, I think I'd probably want to present myself in the best of lights. I'd want to say, "Yeah, I knew what he was about the whole time." I would likely be dishonest to prove myself. But the light also shines the truth about ourselves and our failures. The disciples were in the light, so they told the truth about their failures. And here is why: because they knew that their failures didn't define them. They knew that God's love defined them. They knew this because Jesus already pronounced that they were the salt and light of the earth, not because of anything they did or didn't do, but because of who they were at the core of their identity - beloved children of God.

One last point. You may remember from Sharon's reading that this passage ends with Jesus saying that your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. Throughout the Gospels, the problem that many of the Pharisees had was that they didn't trust that they were already salt and light. And so what did they do? They had to compare their sense of goodness with others who they labeled as bad. Jesus says that if you want to be righteous, then stop playing that game. Stop thinking that you are a good person because you think you are better than someone else. Because when we start comparing ourselves to others, we begin to lose our saltiness and our light.

Instead of playing the competitive game of knowing that we are good because we label others as bad, just know that we are already the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You are already greatly valued by God. This is not to make us arrogant, but, as Jesus says, opens us up to boldly sharing our light and salt with the world.

And so may you receive Jesus' pronouncement that you already are salt and light of the world. You already are valued and loved.

And may we share our salt and light with the world, to make it a more just and loving place. Amen.