

Pastor's Message – 2/21/21  
Sermon on the Mount: Salt and Light

Jesus was never afraid to mix metaphors. In his Sermon on the Mount, he calls us salt and he calls us light. If his Beatitudes show us to be uniquely blessed, these two word pictures of salt and light show us that our uniqueness is meant to make a difference in the world. It's one thing to be different. It's another to make a difference.

People these days may walk away from the church because they just can't see what difference the church makes in the world or in their own lives for that matter. Others may stay away completely for the same reason. Years ago, when Mahatma Gandhi was the spiritual leader of India, he was asked by some missionaries, "What is the greatest hindrance to Christianity in India?" His reply was, "Christians."

Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish Christians from the rest of the world. These salt and light word pictures won't let us get away with that. They presume that the world and the church are different. If we Christians are "the salt of the earth," then the earth must need some preserving or it will go bad. If we are "the light of the world," then the world must be a dark place in need of light.

What is so heartening about Jesus' "salt" and "light" metaphors is his utter confidence that his followers are making a difference in the world. This confidence is amazing considering how few his followers were at this point and how unlikely a group of influencers they seemed to be. There is no skepticism here about an irrelevant church or a church turned in on itself. He declares Christians to be salt and light as a fact, not a future hope, but a present reality. Salt and light—this is who we are! As Popeye put it so well, "I Yam What I Yam!" We are salt, and we are light, and that's what we are!

Beneath these two word pictures is a deep love and concern for the world. The church does not hate the world. God does not hate the world. Our Creator God has gone out of his way to preserve and enlighten the world. Government was God's idea to hold the world back from chaos. The home—our families—this was God's idea, too, to bring order and beauty to human relationships. God has this amazing love for his creation.

It's in this sense that we need to hear the salt and light metaphors describing the church. God has put his church on earth, not to blend into it, but to save it. We are here for the world, just as Christ was here for the world. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..." (John 3:16).

This is why an isolated church is not God's intent. Not long ago, a longtime member of a declining church in the Midwest said, "I know we won't be here for long, but I just want our church to be here long enough so that those of us who are left can be buried in the church cemetery." How is that for a church's mission statement? The statement is disturbing on several levels: it is self-centered and self-

serving; it focuses on death, not life; and it has thrown the towel in as far as the church's love for the world is concerned.

Until Christians love the world as God loves the world, we will not be salt and light. Have you noticed how salt must have contact to have its impact? Salt that stays in the shaker is useless. We Christians are like that. To follow Jesus, we have to make contact. We need to know and love the people God has placed around us—neighbors, classmates, and co-workers. We need to love our corner of the world enough to change it, renew it, nurture it and serve it. That's why when Jesus prayed the night before he died on the cross, he assured his Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). In other words, "Through them, Father, through this rag-tag bunch of followers, I'll shake the salt-shaker and turn on the light for the world!"

Think for a moment. How does that make you feel? There was an old *New Yorker* magazine cartoon that has a wife saying to her husband, "Maybe we're not the salt of the earth, but we're the salt of the Upper East Side." Sounds like she's feeling pretty good about herself. Sermon on the Mount Christians may not have a direct influence that extends across the face of the earth, but we have our sphere, our stage for the drama of the kingdom of God. We have a playing field, an arena, in which we are salt and light.

An observation by an unknown 12th-century monk has made the rounds in the church for centuries. He wrote:

"When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world."

(inspirationalarchive.com).

So, being salt and light begins inside each of us. So, we pray for the heart of a servant. We pray for open doors, new opportunities for our witness. We repent for salt still in the shaker and lights hidden under bushels. Mostly, though, we resolve to spend time with Christ, nurturing his presence, reflecting on his sacrifice, gratefully receiving his love. We long to know him more (Phil 3:10), and in knowing him, we become more and more who he says we are. We are salt. We are light. That's what we are and that's what we're called to be! Amen.