

Being Salt, Being Light

The third of five sermons in the Lenten series

“A People of Salt and Light—Jesus’ Model for Community”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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- Matthew 5:13-16 ¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. ¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Following Jesus, we are to be noticeable difference-makers in the world.

This Lenten sermon series is focused on the Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus proposed his model for how a community united by faith should function. Let’s begin today’s episode about “being people of salt and light” by talking baseball.

My father lives in southern California, and because of his wife’s work in the non-profit world, he used to attend a lot of charity events. At one such function he became acquainted with a fellow who worked with the association for retired Major League Baseball umpires. As they chatted, at one point he told my father that when it comes to calling balls and strikes there are three kinds of umpires: “First, there’s the kind who say, ‘I call ‘em as I see ‘em.’ Then there’s the kind of umpire who says about calling balls and strikes, ‘I call ‘em as they *are!*’” And finally, there are the umpires who say about pitches, “They’re *nothing until* I call ‘em.’”

There’s certainly a bit of ego showing from behind the chest protectors and masks. The last attitude, though, is an example of something that we actually encounter in today’s gospel reading. When it comes to calling balls and strikes the umpires who say “They’re nothing *until* I call ‘em” are illustrating what is called “performative language.” Performative language does “not merely describe something that already is, but bring[s] into being the reality [it declares.]”¹ In the umpire’s case, unless a batter swings at it, regardless of where it’s thrown a pitch is just a pitch *until* the umpire declares it a ball or strike. It’s the umpire saying it that makes it so. A minister pronouncing a couple “husband and wife” or a judge pronouncing a sentence for a convicted felon are other examples of performative language—language that brings into being the reality it declares.

The Bible contains examples of performative language. Isaiah presents God speaking in performative language, writing

¹⁰Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and don’t return there without watering the earth, making it conceive and yield plants and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater, ¹¹so is my word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend.²

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 177b.

² Isaiah 55:10-11 Common English Bible

And this morning we heard performative language on the lips of Jesus. Remember, in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus is addressing three audiences:

- First there's the people gathered on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee.
- Then there is the audience Matthew wrote his gospel for: Jewish followers of Jesus in the early decades of the Christian movement.
- And third, Jesus is talking to the generations that came after the earliest Christian believers, including talking to you and me today through these long-preserved words.

So what was Jesus saying *then*, and what is he saying still *today*? He used the metaphors of salt and light to describe all who choose to follow where he leads. We are to be salt. We are to be light. Not "we" individually, but "we" collectively.

What did he mean? What difference would that make? Actually, that's his point: Christians are to be difference-makers in the world.

Let's think for a moment what difference, what impact is made by common, ordinary things like salt and light.

Salt is everywhere. Ninety-six percent of the world's water is saltwater.³ The water in our bodies is about as salty as seawater.⁴ Of course, we're living atop an enormous vein of salt a couple hundred feet below ground. We may resent it when our vehicles develop road salt stains during the winter season, but we sure are relieved when we're trying to navigate slippery, snow-covered streets and highways and we see a plow truck spreading road salt.

You've probably heard that the word "salary" derives from the Latin word for "salt" because Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. Salt is not only an important part of one's diet, but in ancient times through recent centuries salt was a valuable commodity because of its use in preservation of food, especially fish and meat.⁵

And here's something I just learned. You know how eating together is sometimes referred to by the quaint term "breaking bread"? Well, back when Matthew's gospel was written it was common to refer to the act of dining with others as "sharing salt."

...So Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." And thus we are. We are "salt" because by Jesus saying it made it so. As people who claim Jesus as our master and brother, our guide through life and our spiritual savior, we are to be salt in the potluck of daily life, adding a unique, undeniable, life-giving zest to the world we live in.

Jesus also said, "You are the light of the world." Now, we've heard this metaphor before. Sometimes it's used for God. For instance, the psalmist described how his Israelite ancestors were able to enter the Promised Land. In Psalm 44 the psalmist declared to God that it was not by their own strength or cleverness. "No," he wrote, "it was [by] your strong hand, [O God] your arm, and the light of your face because you were pleased with them."⁶ In the New Testament, the First Letter of John declares, "...God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."⁷

³ <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/earthhowmuch.html> accessed 2/28/2018

⁴ <http://www.sciencefocus.com/qa/how-much-salt-human-body>, accessed 2/28/2018

⁵ "From Salt to Salary: Linguists take a page from science" at <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2014/11/08/362478685/from-salt-to-salary-linguists-take-a-page-from-science>, accessed 2/28/2018

⁶ Psalm 44:3b Common English Bible

⁷ 1 John 1:5 New Revised Standard Version

Jesus used the metaphor to describe his own nature. In John 8:12 we're told, "Jesus spoke to the people again, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"⁸

But now Jesus is telling us, "You are the light of the world."

In both the metaphors of salt and light, note the condition Jesus adds: we're not salt simply to spice up our own lives. We're not light merely to draw attention to ourselves. We're to be salt *to the earth*. We're to be the light *of the world*. Jesus directs us to help the world get a taste of what life can be like when we care for one another, and especially when we care for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised rather than taking advantage of whoever we can for whatever we can get. Jesus challenges us to help the world see how his way of caring for others and devotion to God is live-giving. We help the world see the power of his way by what we as a Christian congregation stand for, by what we do, by how we engage the world we live in. A professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has added, "The church needs to remember constantly that it is in fact not the light itself but only the window through which the light [of Christ] is to be seen."⁹

Jesus adds two cautions. First, he warns that salt that loses its saltiness becomes worthless and might as well be thrown underfoot (or maybe spread on icy roads). Salt doesn't actually lose its properties as salt, but it can be mixed with other stuff to such a great degree that its impurity renders it basically useless – it's so diluted that you'd never notice it.

Then Jesus warns that the purpose of light is defeated if you hide it under a basket or a flower pot... or perhaps behind the closed doors of a building. Light is meant to be shone, shared, illuminating, readily apparent.

What Jesus is telling those believers on the hillside and these believers here at the bottom of the hill is to be sure that we are noticed because of our faith in him. If people can't tell by what we say and what we do that we stand for Jesus in our world, then we've allowed our faith to be diluted like a handful of salt in a bushel full of soil. We have allowed the hope of our faith to be hidden like a light bulb glowing in a closed-off room. If in the eyes of the world around us our church is indistinguishable from a chamber of commerce or a book club or a sorority or a fine arts society, we're not being effective in sharing the salt, the light that is our confident trust in God through Jesus Christ.

In being salt and light in our community Jesus doesn't ask us to be annoying, or obnoxious, or judgmental, or snooty. That would be counter-productive, wouldn't it? Who enjoys associating with people behaving like that? Still, Jesus does say to the crowd... to the church, "Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven."¹⁰

Individually, but even more as a church, Jesus urges us to be salt. He urges us to be light. Let our life as a faith community and our work as God's agents in the world embody the words of the psalmist: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him."¹¹

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⁸ Common English Bible

⁹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993, 45.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:16 Common English Bible

¹¹ Psalm 34:8 New Revised Standard Version