



“Salt and Light”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

September 29, 2004

Our Scripture lesson this afternoon comes from Matthew 5:3-16, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just returned from his temptation in the wilderness and has just called his first disciples. He has been traveling throughout Galilee performing miracles and casting out demons. The disciples are joined here at Jesus' feet by a crowd that has gathered hoping to catch a glimpse of the celebrity in their midst. Jesus proclaims this Word to the crowd from the top of a mountain, the location of choice for Matthew when he wishes to emphasize an important message. Here the Word of God: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Here ends our reading, this is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

Jesus was indeed a local celebrity when he addressed his disciples and the crowds on the mount. He had been proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand and demonstrating his power over nature and genetics, even over the forces of evil. So one would think that when he asked the disciples to follow him that they were likely to have jumped at the opportunity, after all, if this guy is preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand and is working all of these miracles, I want to be fishing on *His* boat when it all goes down. So I can't help but wonder what the crowds and disciples were expecting when Jesus began his sermon and began to speak words about faithfulness and discipleship and life that were far different from any other message they had heard. After all, look at who Jesus calls blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers (as opposed to the 'cheese makers' as Monty Python will tell you), those who are persecuted...my sense of it is that these weren't exactly the most popular folks of his day. I would think that all those hearing Jesus' words would have found it a little interesting that the people Jesus calls apart as blessed are the very individuals that society then- and even now- doesn't really know what to do with. After all, I don't always know what to say to those who mourn, or how to approach those who face poverty of spirit or circumstance. Sometimes those who are meek get on my nerves- 'come on, stand up for yourself'! And heaven knows, the peacemakers haven't been having such a good run as of late-forget being merciful, let's talk about justice! What Jesus shares with us is a sort of divine subversion- What you see before you today is not what will be reflected in the Kingdom of God. This is not a 'to do' list for us today, it is not the law by which we are to live, but it is the gospel by which we are saved. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the future reality of God's kingdom where those who may be considered controversial or may solicit discomfort within others for their messages of grief or hope or peace despite plummeting popularity ratings

are considered blessed. As one scholar reminds us, “One with God constitutes a majority.” Suddenly this beloved local celebrity Jesus sounds a bit controversial.

It is a good thing that Jesus continues his sermon with instruction for his disciples, for the crowd, for all of us, because it is hard to make sense of this new order that Jesus foretells. After all, how are we as Christians to live both within the world but also in anticipation of some future kingdom that we can't see and have a very hard time even understanding? When we submitted the sermon title for this week, 'Salt and Light', to the newspaper, an editor called us back inquiring if there hadn't been some mistake, “Doesn't she mean 'soft and light'?” this well meaning individual asked. While I do love fabric softener, and as cozy cuddly as the Gospel is sometimes made out to be, as spring-scented and fresh as the message of many elated disciples often is today- Jesus uses two words to characterize discipleship: Salt and Light. And this description is not to be taken for granted, for it is laced with great trial, as Jesus well knew, but promises great reward- like the Beatitudes, it won't always be popular, but in the struggle you will be considered blessed. “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” Though it may sound strange, it would be impossible for us to overestimate the importance of salt in the ancient world. Salt was used as a preservative, a balm of healing, and a crucial element in nutrition. Religious ritual demanded all sacrifices be salted before being offered to God in Jesus' day, and one grain of salt placed in a tooth cavity was the usual remedy for a toothache. But the combination of millions of these tiny grains has built and toppled economies, been exchanged as currency, and has been the subject of contemplation for everyone from poets and philosophers to virtually every world religion. In the book of Numbers there is a reference to an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord. By retaining our flavor as Christians, we retain the essential seasoning of our covenant with our God, so that shouldn't be so hard, should it? I mean, with so much at stake we can get this thing right...right?

Now, if you are like me, the first time you heard this scripture you probably thought Jesus made a little faux pas- after all, salt can't lose its flavor. It can become rock hard, it can become damp so that it won't come out of the shaker unless you unscrew the top, bang it on the table, and pour it out. Even so, it tastes the same. It is still salt, right? A primary source of salt in Jesus' day was the shore of the Dead Sea. Nothing was really known about refining salt in those days and it was actually quite difficult to tell the difference between the salt and the sand on the seashores. So this substance which they called salt was really a mixture of the two, sometimes more salt than sand. But when it was more sand than salt it was considered to have “lost its savor” and therefore, as Jesus said, was good for nothing. So salt indeed does not lose its flavor, but is rendered useless when it becomes mixed with impurities that obscure it. As disciples of Christ, this passage is warning us that there are things which surround us that threaten to take away our flavor. Things that seek to incorporate themselves into our lives and our being to render us incapable of seasoning life with our faith. Were Jesus here, he may just point to such things as greed, hatred, prejudice, pressure, disillusionment, gossip, sensationalism, fear, trial- all these and so many more that haunt us daily from all sides, that seek to gain entrance into our families and our faith, pounding incessantly on the doors to our hearts demanding that we surrender just a bit of our flavor to them. In this way the gospel cannot be domesticated, we can celebrate our flavor to be sure but be on the alert lest our witness be rendered tasteless when we

are called to be salt to the world- for there are surely many who won't appreciate the addition of unexpected flavor to an otherwise pleasantly complacent meal.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” What is at stake here is exposure, a city on a hill is one for all to see even if it means that those who wish to lay siege to it know exactly where to go. Jesus doesn't ask, he tells us that we are called to that visibility, that authenticity, to that sometimes uncomfortable, public witness to the new life we as individuals and as a society are called to in Jesus Christ that often renders us vulnerable to assault. But Jesus goes on, “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Switch on a light and a dark room is transformed. Without the light of God in Christ being carried boldly before the disciples, the world cannot see clearly what it is or where it is going. Saint Augustine, near the end of his life became unconscious one day and had what he perceived to be a vision of the divine. A vision that put the entirety of his life and volumes of theological work that he had dedicated himself to into perspective. He said, “All my words were like straw in the wind and the light.” I hold on to this image because I think this is the kind of light Jesus is talking about- the kind of light he is himself- and the kind of light he calls the disciples- calls us- to carry before us. That utterly humbling, soul quenching, life transforming, penetrate to the core of who you are, break through the darkness and the fear and bathe yourself in grace kind of light that is our God! Put that on your lamp stand and let that puppy shine! “This little light of mine,” I don't think so, this is the light of the world we are talking about here and Jesus himself is here to tell you that this light is not just in your hands- it is who you are- you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth. He does not say, be brighter light, be zestier salt, he says let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works- be the flavor that you are, that you are called to be, that you were created for as you bear the image of our God, the light of the world, and people will taste this new flavor, experience healing in its presence, will find their path lit and will glorify God in heaven for it.

Last week the day before we met in this sanctuary there was a birthday celebration going on in Fort Worth Texas. It was for a light bulb. This light bulb started its life as the stage door light of the local opera house on September 21, 1909, and hung by a nearby sign saying it should not be turned off. The building is now a museum and the bulb still burns, drawing on its own power source and emitting a 95 year old forty watts for all to admire. Unique among its peers? To be sure. And how strange that such a little light should gain such notoriety when by today's standards of halogen and gas light emission it would appear to be a relic. I will say this, though, letting your light shine never gets old, and no matter what changes around it, no matter how empty the room may seem, no matter how vast the darkness closing in, it brings glory to God. Jesus didn't offer us better cellular coverage, faster text messaging, he offered us salt and light. He offered us the promise that those suffering and working for the cause of peace will inherit the earth, and he promised us that there will be persecution as he himself was persecuted. But he does not suggest, he tells us in the imperative, to be bold in claiming who we are, not in conformity to any law, not for fear of breaking any commandment, but in full freedom and in wonder over what it is to be disciples of Christ, to be a people of salt and light. Amen.