

“Salt and Light”

a sermon by

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Text: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:14-15).

Someone once called Jesus “the great disturber,” and there is a sense in which that is true. One of the most frustrating things about trying to follow Jesus is that he always remains so far ahead of us. Whenever we think we have captured him, he continually eludes us.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the Sermon on the Mount. These chapters form the essence of Jesus’ teaching. The Sermon on the Mount introduces a higher righteousness than had ever occurred in Jewish thought. The ancient law taught that it was unlawful to murder. Jesus said we are not to be angry as well. The Law of Moses insisted that we should love our neighbors. Jesus said that we should love our enemies. Jesus said we should turn the other cheek, go the second mile.

Harvey Cox pointed out recently that for almost two thousand years this aspect of Jesus’ teaching was largely ignored. It was admired; it was taught; it brought great adulation, but it was essentially ignored. Remarkably, however, this teaching of Jesus was discovered in the Twentieth Century by a person who was not a Christian, Mahatma Gandhi, a native of India. Gandhi saw in the teaching of Jesus a powerful weapon to rid his native land of the oppression of the British Empire. Through the power of nonviolence Gandhi brought the most powerful nation of the world to its knees.

When Gandhi's biographer, Louis Fisher, visited him in his tiny cottage at Hashram in 1942, he noticed there was only one picture on the wall. The picture was of Jesus and underneath the picture were the words "He is Our Peace" (from Ephesians 2). In spite of the efforts of a number of missionaries Gandhi never became a Christian. He insisted that he loved Christ, but he believed that Christianity had gone wrong when it became the "religion of kings."

I.

Nowhere is the centrality of Jesus' thought more critical than in his words to his disciples in Matthew 5. In speaking of discipleship Jesus uses two metaphors that would be familiar to every person living in the world of the ancient near east: salt and light.

In the ancient world salt was as essential as bread and water. It was a means of preserving food. It gave food its taste. We live in a world with refrigeration and very sophisticated food preservatives but in the world of the New Testament salt was essential to life. Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth." He told them that they were essential to the preservation of society. They were to give to it its flavor, its essence, and its breath.

The same is true of light. That is a saying that is difficult for most of us to understand. I think I got a glimpse of this two years ago during the power storm that crippled much of our city during the winter. For five days there was no power in my home. I remember going into the house each day. The house was getting colder and colder each day that the heat did not return. I looked at all of the gadgets around me: television sets, computers, telephones, and all the things we take for granted--completely worthless without energy.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." He was smart enough to know that his words were a mockery of the Roman Empire. Cicero once described Rome as the "light of the whole world." Jesus said there was a different kind of light, and that it is what he calls us to be.

II.

Somewhere along the way we have lost our sense of direction. So often it seems to me that our churches have bought into this consumer culture lock, stock, and barrel. We advertise ourselves now in terms of comforts. You don't have to dress up. You don't have to drive far. You can just go to a neighborhood theater and watch us on a big screen. We pride ourselves on our child care, our music, our entertaining worship, and ample parking for everyone.

Where is the commitment? Where is the sacrifice? Where is the notion that following Jesus actually costs us something?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* distinguishes between what he calls "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, communion without confession, and absolution without confession. Cheap grace is

grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the gospel that must be sought again and again, the gift which must be sought again and again, the answer which must be asked for, the door on which we must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his or her life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life.

When I think of costly grace, I think of the life of a man like James Reeb. Most people today don't know who James Reeb was. He was a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary in the Class of 1953. He was a young minister who had served as a Presbyterian chaplain in a hospital in Philadelphia, an assistant pastor for a Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington, D.C., before finding his place as a Quaker working with a lower income housing project in Boston.

In March of 1965 James Reeb responded to the call of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Alabama to help register African-American citizens of that state to vote. On his first day at work, March 11th, James Reeb was killed by a group of white assailants who attacked him on the streets of Selma, Alabama.

The death of James Reeb had a profound effect on the people of this nation. Somehow it seemed so hard to understand how a young minister who was just trying to help people to exercise one of the most basic rights of citizenship could be killed in such a brutal way. Four days after the death of James Reeb, the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson introduced to a joint session of Congress the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was immediately passed.

Although the President invited Dr. King to attend the signing of this historic legislation at the White House the next day, King declined, choosing instead to stay in Selma and to deliver the eulogy at the funeral of James Reeb.

In that address King raised the question, "Who killed James Reeb?" The answer, said King, was pretty simple. He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided individuals who hunted down an unarmed man on the streets of Selma and beat him to death.

But when Dr. King went from the question of *who* killed James Reeb to *what* killed James Reeb; he came to a different conclusion. This is what he said.

"James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale

bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement agent who practices lawlessness in the name of law.”

So, how does the church move from “cheap grace” to “costly grace?” How do we become what Jesus calls us to be--the light of the world and the salt of the earth?

III.

It happens when the church of Christ rediscovers Jesus and his way of life. It happens when the Sermon on the Mount becomes not an empty slogan but a guideline for our lives.

There is a sense in which the Sermon on the Mount is an ideal that will always elude us. Reinhold Niebuhr once called the ethic of Jesus an “impossible possibility.” In one sense it is never possible. Jesus taught a perfect, and therefore an impossible ethic with no concessions to the weakness of humans or to the relativities of our social situation. But in another sense the ethic of Jesus is very possible. Because it calls us to an ethic of love and responsibility, there is no situation to which it cannot be applied.

In dealing with ourselves it calls us to a life of genuineness and integrity so that not only will we not murder, but we will not perpetrate anger and violence.

In dealing with others it calls us to respect and cherish the rights and will of all people.

In dealing with God it calls us to an absolute trust that is confident of his love for us and for all his children.

Many people think that the Sermon on the Mount is irrelevant. In fact, it has been the inspiration of the church throughout the ages so that whenever the church rediscovers Jesus, it finds itself renewed and invigorated.

It happened in Italy when St. Francis of Assisi served the poor and downtrodden of the town in which he lived. He had discovered Jesus and his way of life.

It happened in England when John Wesley turned his back upon the dry and arid religion of the church of England in his own day and leaving the sedate edifices of the church went out to preach to the despised and poor people of his day, bringing about a revolution in the church. He had rediscovered Jesus.

It happened in the United States of American in the early part of the Twentieth Century when a Baptist minister by the name of Walter Rauschenbusch established a ministry in “Hell’s Kitchen,” in the middle of New York City, to a group of downtrodden, out of work people, who were living without hope. He wrote a book that he entitled *The Theology of the Social Gospel*. He rediscovered not only the prophets of the Old Testament. He rediscovered Jesus.

This past summer when one of the children who were part of the Freedom School were asked to write about what it was like living in some of the worst neighborhoods of Charlotte, where drug busts and gunshots, killing and looting were a part of everyday life for them as

getting up in the morning and going to work or school is for us, I remember one girl who asked the question of “how long” this would go on.

I have wondered myself how long this will go on. How long will the hopelessness of our inner cities continue?

How long? Not long, because I believe that God is calling his people to become salt and light.

How long? Not long because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because God has called us to live in such a way that “justice will flow like a river, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Amen