

“Pass the Salt”

Matthew 5:13-16

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This morning our attention is drawn to a hillside on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us the news about Jesus’ ability to teach and heal had spread throughout all of Palestine, and people traveled great distances to see and hear this miracle worker.

As the crowds swelled one day just south of Capernaum, Jesus climbed to the top of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee and began teaching. We refer to this collection of Jesus’ teachings as the Sermon on the Mount. Today’s text is a portion of that sermon and falls between the Beatitudes, which describe the joy experienced by those who reflect God’s heart and will, and the demands of the gospel which follow later in the sermon.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said, “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 underfoot.”

“You are the light of the world.” he continued. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a 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 they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

You know what intrigues me the most about today’s text? It is what Jesus did not say to the crowd on that hillside.

I would not have been surprised had he said to them, “**One day** you will become the salt of the earth and light of the world, but only after you have become my disciple, been baptized, received training and joined a support group.”

I would not have been shocked had he said, “I want you **to consider** becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let me explain the requirements and expectations, and if you are interested in knowing more, come and see me.”

I certainly would not have paused for a moment had Jesus said, “**Some of you** will become the salt of the earth and the light of the world,” implying others would not for a variety of reasons.

Jesus did not phrase his words this way, though. He was bold, direct and inclusive when he said, “**You are** the salt of the earth, and **you are** the light of the world.” He excluded no one in that crowd, and he did not speak in terms of the future, but the present.

Why did Jesus do this? I pondered this question a great deal last week and believe Jesus was trying to accomplish two things with this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. He wanted to build up the self-esteem of those in the crowd and send them out to partner with God where God was at work in the world.

Why did Jesus need to build up their self esteem? These people had been oppressed all their lives, and it had taken a toll on them.

They were viewed as slaves by the Romans and had been led to believe they were inferior. Their own religious leaders shunned them in favor of the wealthy and powerful, reinforcing that message of inferiority. Everywhere they turned, their value, worth and importance were minimized.

There was no room at the table of decision-making for them. Their opinions and counsel were ignored, and their needs and grievances fell on deaf ears. No leaders, secular or religious, tapped them for a task of great importance until the day Jesus came their way.

I can only imagine what it must have been like when they heard Jesus say, “**You are** the salt of the earth and light of the world.” Surely, they looked in disbelief at one another and then began to grin as what he was saying registered.

You see, the images of salt and light spoke clearly to them and said much about them. “There is nothing more useful than sun or salt,” the Romans were fond of saying, but your doctor never will.

Salt was such a valuable commodity in Jesus’ day, used to preserve and flavor food and to cleanse and heal wounds. This was why soldiers were often paid in salt. Our words, salary and sale, even come from the word for salt.

No one wanted to live without salt, and neither did anyone want to live without candles. For the most part, Palestinian homes consisted of one room with a small opening, which let sunlight in on warm days. Candles were as essential for navigating that crowded room as sunlight was for their health and disposition.

Now you understand why the Romans said nothing was more useful than sun and salt, and you realize why Jesus used these images to describe how important the common people in that crowd were to God. Can you imagine how good this made them feel to be elevated to a status reserved only for Roman royalty or religious leaders like the scribes and Pharisees?

Yes, Jesus called them salt and light to build up their self-esteem. In his eyes, they were an important and necessary part of the kingdom of God.

I also believe Jesus told the people that day they were the salt of the earth and light of the world as a way of inviting them to join him in partnering with God to change the world for the better. Just as Jesus brought hope and healing to the people he met along his way, so could they.

Every one of them could lift people's spirits and help them carry their burdens. Each person in that crowd could feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort the grieving, listen to the stories of those who had to bury a dream, walk alongside those who were frightened, embrace the outcast, encourage those facing stiff challenges, give wise counsel to those who were confused, forgive those who hurt them, ask forgiveness from those they had slighted, speak truth to power and use their influence to demand justice for all people.

They needed no one's permission to be kind, compassionate, courageous and bold, and they did not need to wait for another time to begin this faith journey. Jesus commissioned them and turned them loose that day. Go change the world one person at a time he challenged them on that hillside. I want to believe they did.

This is what excites me about the gospel. It is personal, active and inclusive. It calls everyone to serve. It challenges all of us to reflect the heart, mind and will of God in all we do, which leads to changes in our lives and those around us.

Who has been salt and light in your life? Whose influence and support inspired you to be the person you are?

Who made hope visible for you and led you out of the darkness and into the light? Who brought the best out in you through words of encouragement and a stellar example?

I hope you have let those people know how grateful you are for all they said and did. I know this would mean a lot to them.

Who needs you to be salt and light and do for them what others did for you? Where is your influence needed this week? Where do your "good works" need to shine?

Who is struggling and needs a helping hand or facing a stiff challenge and could use a word of encouragement?

Who is hoping you will notice their plight and respond to their cries for help?

Who needs you to reflect the heart, mind and will of God through the decisions you make and the things you do?

Who needs you to quit hiding your candle under a bushel, but seize every opportunity to do what is best and right?

Who is watching you to learn what is really important in life, and what it means to be a disciple? What did they learn from your “good deeds” last week? What could they learn this week?

James Brewer-Calvert, a pastor friend of mine, shared a story with me which occurred when he was fifteen. He grew up in New York City near the vicinity of 3rd Avenue and 104th Street.

He awakened on a rainy Saturday morning to discover the drains in the street had clogged, and the roads and sidewalks were flooding. “This is awful,” he thought to himself as he looked out the window to the streets below. “Somebody ought to do something about this!”

Just then, he saw two people walking in the rain through the water. They were barefoot and had their pants rolled up to their knees. One by one, they went to the drains, digging out debris and trash so the rushing water could escape. Looking more closely, he recognized the couple. They were his parents.

“I’ll never forget that experience,” he said. “This was the time I realized the ‘somebody who ought to do something about this’ included me. It was a ‘salt and light’ moment.”

Who is going to be watching you this week?