

## Becoming Salt and Light

Matthew 5:(3-12) 13-16

*Second Sunday in Lent/ 17<sup>th</sup> March 2019*

Salt and light. Are they tired metaphors for the Christian life today? Perhaps salt really has lost its saltiness and light its luster? Salt is certainly essential to life; we would die without it. Although too much salt, we know, is not good for us, especially if you have high blood pressure or heart disease. And as for light, for most of in the world, although marvellous and necessary for life, we kind of take it for granted. It's there at a flip of a switch. We carry around flashlights on our phones. The daily rising of the sun doesn't fill us with exactly the same kind of awe as our ancestors. For us, the natural world has become disenchanted.

In Jesus' time, salt was an extremely valuable, essential commodity. The Roman Empire issued its soldiers "salt money," a *salarium*, money for a soldier to buy salt. *Salarium* is the root of the English word *salary*. Salt was and is a rich metaphor, but Jesus never really says in what way we are salt. And I say, "we," because Jesus is talking to the crowd, to the disciples. The "you" is plural. *All of you*, or, better, *y'all*. *Y'all are the salt of the earth; y'all are the light of the world*. Still, Jesus never says in what way y'all are salt. Are we a preservative? Are we here to enhance the flavour and tastiness of the earth? Salt doesn't really lose its saltiness; it endures, so the metaphor doesn't really work. Are we a purifying agent?

But we shouldn't push the salt metaphor too far because it doesn't stand on its own in the text. Salt goes with light; they're tied together—which is easier to see in the Greek. Light features prominently throughout Matthew's Gospel, and his allusions to light are rooted in the Hebrew scriptures, especially Isaiah 9, 42, and 58. Light suggests revelation, instruction, the law, righteousness, God's presence.<sup>1</sup>

Salt and light, together, reflect God's covenant with Israel and God's commitment to the world, through God's people. In the ancient world, salt was used in covenant making ceremonies. In Leviticus (2:13), Numbers (18:19), 2 Chronicles (13:5), and Ezra (4:14), salt was eaten by itself or with bread to commit to a covenant agreement. The Roman Catholic Church uses salt in the sacrament of baptism. Salt and light signal that God is doing something new in and through Jesus, and that to be his disciple is to be a herald of a new and lasting covenant effected by Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

To be his disciple is to be salt and light. Still, Jesus never really says how, except that we are light set on a hill for all to see, and that we are to shine. But how? And what does that mean for us in a world that has a very different relationship with light? Are we given any instructions here?

The answer is yes, but they're often overlooked because these verses are often lifted out from the flow of the sermon and taken out of context. Take a look at what comes before verse 13 and you'll see Jesus' blessing statements, the Beatitudes. As we discovered last week, behind the English word "blessed" is the Greek word *makarios*, which is extremely difficult to translate. *Makarios* can be translated as "blessed," but it can also mean "blissful," "happy," "fortunate," or "flourishing."

We also discovered another problematic Greek word in the text; it's the word, *hoti*, often translated "for." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom" (Mt. 5:3). The use of the word "for" in each statement creates the impression that these descriptions of blessedness will be experienced one day, in the future. It's also easy to read or hear these verses as saying: *If I am poor in spirit, God will bless me, and then I will enter the kingdom. If I am meek, then I will inherit the earth. If I am pure in heart, then I will see God, etc.* If I live this way, I will be blessed. If we took a poll, my guess is that most of us have read it this way. If "p," then "q." The problem is that this "if-then" approach is a "flat," one might say even *boring* way of reading this text.

However, *hoti* (for) can also be translated "because." When we translate the Beatitudes this way, using "flourish" instead of "blessed," everything changes:

*Flourishing are the poor in spirit because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*

*Flourishing are the mourners because they will be comforted.*

*Flourishing are the humble because they will inherit the earth.*

*Flourishing are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness  
because they will be satisfied.*

*Flourishing are the merciful because they will be given mercy.*

*Flourishing are the pure in heart because they will see God.*

*Flourishing are the peacemakers because they will be called the children of God.*

*Flourishing are the ones persecuted on account of righteousness  
because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*

*Flourishing are you whenever people revile and slander you and speak all kinds of evil  
against you on account of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven,  
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.<sup>3</sup>*

*Y'all are the salt of the earth... Y'all are the light of the world.*

You see, the salt and light metaphors actually belong to the beatitudes. They flow out from the blessing statements, they're a continuation of what comes before them. Jesus wants his disciples to see that when we live this way, live the way he lived, we will come to see what a flourishing life looks like; and when we are flourishing in this way we are being salt and light in the world. Something happens to and in the world through us, because of us.

What's striking about Jesus' words to us is that he wants us to see that we are salt and light—already. Eugene Peterson reminds us that, "Scripture does not present us with a moral code and tell us 'Live up to this,' nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say 'Think like this and you will live.' Rather"—and this is crucial—"the biblical way is to tell a story and in the telling invite: 'Live into this—this is what it looks like to be human in the God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being.'"<sup>4</sup>

Live into this. Live into this vision. Live into thinking of yourself as salt and light. What if we leaned forward into it? What if we allowed the symbol to shape us, inform us, touch us, spark something in us, teach us, lead us as a church? If we lived and served this

way we will find ourselves being changed. Becoming salt and light. Jesus has already said we are salt, we are light. Now become who you are. Become who are already.

Go ahead: Shine! “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). Go ahead, let your light shine. Shine, Church, shine! Don’t hide your light under a bushel. Don’t hide who you are. Don’t be afraid to shine! Flourish! Become who you are!

In love, Jesus calls us out and invites us to shine. That’s what love does. “Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.”<sup>5</sup> That’s how Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) put it, the African-American author and anthropologist. “Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.”

Jesus calls us to shine. But what does this mean for us, we who have a different relationship with light? There’s still, God knows, plenty of darkness in the world. What does it mean for us to be light today? Jesus tells us we’re light, but we all know that we’re not the source of light. I’m not. You’re not. The Church is not. But perhaps we can be the conduit for light, the channel of light. As the slogan or motto of *The Baltimore Sun* reads “LIGHT FOR ALL.” That’s who we are. As servants of the Light, we are called to help each other see more clearly: to see who we are (and aren’t), to see our neighbors—truly see them, not our fearful and false projections, but who they really are; to see the world around us, and to see more clearly who God is (and isn’t) and what God is calling us to be (and not be) and calling us to do (and not do).

What if these days we’re called to be more than a shining light on a hill—static, stationary, emanating light? That feels kind of passive. The church must be active. We need to shine. As disciples of the Light, we need to use the light that we have, that we are, to illumine the dark places in the world. We need to bring more light into the world. This is one way to view the effect of our Envision Fund—hopefully, we’re bring more light into the world.

So, instead of stationary light for all to see, what if we were more like search lights or headlamps? Consider what it’s like to drive down a dark road at night. The headlamps on the car illumine the road so we can make our way through the dark, but we know that the darkness is still there, just beyond the range of our high beams, and we’re careful because we never know what’s lurking in the darkness, about jump out in front of us. The more light we have the easier our way through the woods.

The Church is called to shine its light in the dark places of the world. We must not be afraid to discover what hides in the darkness. The Church is called to be a spotlight on all that lurks in places and people that are enemies of the light. Isn’t this how we expose injustice in the church and in society? Don’t we have to shine light on it to see it? Otherwise it hides in the darkness and shadow and it works its diabolic deeds of division and destruction. When we shine a light on injustice or a wrong, we see it, and then we can name it. We call it out. Isn’t this what our teenagers were doing on Friday’s [Global Climate Strike](#), demanding climate change reform? They were shining light on an issue, to help us see what some continue to deny, those who live in the darkness of denial. This is holy work.

To act this way means that we must be confident about who we are, it requires courage, it requires strength, and it requires grace and love and mercy to shine the light on the dark and shadowy places in our lives and in the world that hinder God's children from flourishing, that hinders their future. The Church needs to shine the light on racism within our hearts and in the Church and institutions, and Church's own complicity in racism, and expose the sin of white supremacy and white nationalism. Princeton Seminary recently completed a comprehensive [historical audit](#) that shines a light on its complicated and complex relationship to slavery in the nineteenth century, and how it benefited from the enslavement of African-Americans. And, given the horrific attack in Christ Church, New Zealand, the Church must continue to call out Islamophobia when we see it. We need to shine the light on places, people, relationships, situations of human cruelty and abuse, systemic injustice. In today's *New York Times* there is a feature article on the rise of violent crime in Baltimore City, especially since Freddie Gray's death in 2015. It's written by Alex MacGillis, who worships at First and Franklin Presbyterian Church, downtown. A lot of light is needed to expose the death-dealing system tearing the city apart, and taking the lives of God's children.<sup>6</sup> And the Church needs to shine the light on evil, and name it evil, and expose it for what it is—in us, in our families and communities, in government and the halls of power.

Go ahead, shine! "Y'all are light," Jesus said! Don't be afraid to shine. And when we do, all our good works will point back not to us, but to the source of light itself. And we'll give God all the glory.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 163-164.

<sup>2</sup> Pennington, 165.

<sup>3</sup> This Pennington's translation of Matthew 5:3-12, 143-144.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 43-44.

<sup>5</sup> Nora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (HarperPerennial, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Alexc MacGillis, "The Tragedy of Baltimore," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/magazine/baltimore-tragedy-crime.html>