

Sermon: Salt and Light

Note: One of my social duties is as lay preacher at [First Presbyterian Church, Portage la Prairie](#). Here is the text of the sermon I delivered February 5, 2023

Scripture Reference: Matthew 5:13-20

Prayer for Understanding

Let us pray

Holy God, Your mysteries surround and astound us each day. Send your Holy Spirit to open the mysteries of Scripture for us so that our understanding is refreshed and courage to follow Christ renewed. Amen.

Introduction

For today's sermon, I'm going to concentrate on the reading from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus tells his followers three things:

- That they are like salt;
- That they are to be the "light of the world"; and
- That he, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law.

Jesus loved to preach through parable and metaphor, so let's dig into the two metaphors about salt and light. Then we can look at what Jesus meant when he said that he was the fulfillment of the Law.

For illustration of the two metaphors, I found a picture of one of those lamps made out of a lump of rock salt from the Himalaya Mountains.



Himalayan Salt Lamp

Credit: [Gnangarra, Creative Commons](#)

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Salt

Salt is an everyday item we are all familiar with and an important one. It is an essential nutrient and has many uses.

Back when we lived in Saskatchewan, my brother bought an old high school chemistry textbook at a flea market. The book was published in the 1930's. This book was interesting because focused on the practical applications of chemistry. It was quite different from the academic approaches to the subject that are in the modern chemistry textbooks that I used. In particular, I found the discussion on the industrial applications of salt fascinating. The book showed how common salt is the basis of a whole chemical industry. In the modern world, the salt industry is used to produce a variety of industrial products such as chlorine, hydrochloric acid, and caustic soda. We use salt to melt ice on the roads and in the more traditional uses that Jesus and his followers were familiar with.

In Jesus' time, like today, the daily uses of salt were:

- To season food and improve its taste. Interesting enough, salt was added to the animal sacrifices made in the Temple.
- Salt was and is used to preserve food. The fishermen among Jesus' disciples would have been familiar with this since, in the absence of mechanical refrigeration, the best way to preserve fish for transport to market was so salt it and dry it.
- Salt is also an antiseptic; rubbing salt into wounds may be painful, but it might also prevent infection.
- Roman soldiers in Jesus' time were paid, in part, in salt. It could be traded like currency. This is the basis of the modern word salary, from the Latin word "*salarium*" which means "salt money."

In looking at this passage from Matthew, what is Jesus asking his followers to do when he tells them that they are the Salt of the Earth?

First, he is asking them, and us, to improve the world. Just as the presence of salt improves the flavour of food, our mission is to improve the world we live in. Unlike salt, which passively changes the chemistry of food, we can improve the world only if we actively work to do so. If we do not, we have become the salt that has lost its savour.

Secondly, Jesus is asking us to preserve what is good in the world. That means, among other things, that we should seek to preserve morality in general and especially to preserve Jesus' teachings. We do this by continuing to preach the Gospel, whether or not the general society wants to hear it. We are also called to speak out on moral questions, such as when Christians led the way in the outlawing of slavery in the 19th Century.

The application of Jesus' teachings is also an antiseptic to the evil in the world. The world may say, for example, that the only purpose we have in the world is to be productive and make money. Christians should counter that the economy should serve people, not the other way around. After all, what do we accomplish if we gain the whole world, but lose our souls?

Finally, Jesus is reminding his followers, including us, that there is a reward for following his teachings. Just as Roman Legionaries were paid in salt, we will be rewarded for following Jesus' teachings. If not in this world, then certainly in the next.

Jesus said: "You are like salt for the whole human race"

Light

Light is certainly a necessity. Without it nothing grows. Without it, we do not thrive. Those of us who have worked in places where it is always dark at certain times of the year have seen how important light is.

When I worked in oil exploration, I did a few tours on a project in the Beaufort Sea. It was winter and as we went further north it got darker and darker. During the two or three weeks I was at the drilling

rig for each tour, the Sun never came out. It was amazing to see the Sun rise at the end of the tour as we flew south.

In Christianity, and many other religions, the light is associated with goodness, whereas darkness is associated with evil. The abode of Satan is often seen as a dark, dreary place where as Heaven is seen as full of light. Even pagans get it. To the ancient Norse, hell was a dark, frozen, wasteland full of hunger whereas Valhalla was a land full of warm fires and feasting.

So when Jesus asks us to be the Light of the World, he is asking us to be a force for good in the world. This is a positive call for action. In your daily life keep in mind that you might be the only example of the Gospel that someone meets that day.

An example of the good works that our Church does is our Soup Kitchen. Feeding the hungry has always been a Christian duty. Another example is our National Church's Presbyterian World Service and Development organization, or PWS&D. One of the options for today was to discuss PWS&D and we may devote a Sunday to that theme sometime in the future. For now it is enough to point out that we are, in part, fulfilling Jesus' call to be the Light of the Word.

As with the metaphor about salt, Jesus asks us not to ignore our duties. He tells us not to hide our light, using the example of a candle hidden by a bushel basket. The Gospel is the light that he is talking about. We must not hide or shirk from our duty to spread the light of the Gospel.

The requirement to preach the Gospel was taken seriously by the original Apostles even though it put them on a dangerous path. No one said it was safe to follow Christ in a world that opposes his message. Let's quickly look at what happened to the first disciples:

- Judas Iscariot was the first to die, by his own hand for his role in Jesus' crucifixion;
- Andrew preached in what is now Bulgaria and Georgia; he was eventually crucified in Greece;
- Bartholomew preached in Georgia and India and was crucified in Georgia;
- James, Son of Alphaeus was stoned and clubbed to death in Jerusalem;
- James, Son of Zebedee was beheaded by Herod;
- His brother John, was exiled to the Island of Patmos and died a natural death in Ephesus;
- Matthew Levi preached in Ethiopia where he was killed with an axe;
- Simon Peter was crucified under Nero in Rome;
- Philip preached and was executed in what is now eastern Turkey;
- Simon the Zealot became Bishop of Jerusalem and was crucified;
- Thaddaeus Judas, the son of James, preached in Edessa and Mesopotamia and was crucified.
- Thomas was a missionary in India where he was killed with a spear;
- Matthias, Judas Iscariot's replacement, spread the Gospel into Syria where he was stoned and beheaded;
- The Apostle Paul died in Rome under Nero.

It's not easy following Jesus' commandment that we be a light for the whole world.

The Fulfillment of the Law

In the passage from verses 17 to 20, Jesus reminds his followers what this is all about. It is not just about being a good person or living a comfortable life. Rather the requirement to spread the Gospel is to fulfill the Law given to the Jews by God.

To the Jews, and all of Jesus' original followers were Jews, the Law was more than just a set of rules. It was and is a sacred duty. Thus Jesus tells them that he has not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it; that is, to bring it to its logical end.

We follow God's law not just for good social order, although it does that. It's not even just about becoming a better person, although it can do that. No, we follow God's law as a demonstration that we are trying to live according to God's will. That we can only do this imperfectly, or as best we can, is a function of our human frailties. It does not mean we shouldn't strive to live according to God's will.

As Jesus said: Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true.

Where are we at now?

In the modern world, Jesus' message is often lost in the clamour of the media, the market and the clash of ideologies. Long gone are the days when the Church was considered a source of moral authority for our society.

In the modern world, most people would rather not hear Christ's call to live a moral life, to be the salt of the earth or the light of the world. They think that when we talk about morality we're trying to change their sex lives. Many people value their freedom, as they see it, and they don't want to be preached at, thank you very much. Meanwhile, they, and we, ignore the moral call to live an honest life.

The Church itself is divided. Many people "go along to get along" and are uncomfortable even considering moral issues. Often, people in the Church have focused on what are, in retrospect, fairly minor private behavioral issues, such as homosexuality. Meanwhile some of the other big issues of morality are ignored. The best example of this is the Church's silence on the issue of rampant dishonesty in our political and commercial world.

Despite laws against it, fraudulent business practices are often tolerated. Here's one example, if you have enough money you can have law makers protect your practice of stealing people's personal data and selling it for a profit. Much of the power and wealth of Big Tech comes from this practice, so it is tolerated or even legalized.

Another example: if you lie in your advertising, more often than not you will get away with it. It's so common, we are no longer shocked.

Other dishonest business practices are also tolerated, after all no one is getting hurt, or so they say. Jack up the price of your company's shares by buying back your own shares, a practice that provides only short term benefits at the expense of the company's future. It used to be illegal, but with the right influence among law makers, it suddenly became technically legal. It's still crooked.

Another example: I remember when one company, Ticketmaster, set up a scheme to scalp tickets. When called on this obvious breach of the law, they made the excuse that they were a large corporation, somehow above the laws that applied to petty criminals. Their eventual response has been to skirt around the laws but they are still seeking to set up their own scalping operation.

Yet another example of the immorality, dishonesty and greed of politicians and business leaders is the current war in Ukraine. It doesn't take much digging to find that many people worked long and hard to bring about this war. We should condemn all those who diligently brought about this catastrophe.

There were also those who have profited greatly from this war and who would like to see it continue for a long time. Such people are evil incarnate but they are also rich and they can buy influence.

With regards to the obscene fortunes being made out of war, I recommend reading some the work of Chris Hedges who reliably points out that there are many people with blood on their hands in this war. Interesting enough, Hedges trained to be a Presbyterian minister before going on to be a war reporter.

We see poor people who run afoul of the law serving long prison sentences, often returning to society with no useful skills and more dangerous to public order than when they were first incarcerated. Meanwhile, wealthy and influential criminals get minor punishments, if they are charged at all. That our law makers and corporate leaders are so easily corrupted should be a concern. But in a world that has turned its back on God, anything goes and nothing matters.

And where is the Church? In my lifetime I have seen many denominations, including our own, wrestle with the issue of private sexual behavior, especially homosexuality. We have spent countless hours on this subject and turned many away from the Church. Meanwhile, we say little about the public dishonesty in our commercial life and public life. Which has done more harm: the private sins of a few or massive public frauds that undermines the trust that any complex society needs to function? When we preach against immorality, have we been barking up the wrong tree? When we hide behind the cynical, but true, observation that there have always been crooked politicians and dishonest businessmen, are we not hiding our light when we fail to criticize dishonesty?

I can only conclude that, often, we have not been the salt of the earth or a light for the whole world. We take up fashionable causes that make us feel virtuous, but make little change in the world.

Where are we going

I would like to be optimistic, but it is difficult. I trust in God, but not so much in people. Yet, trusting in God is the chief reason to find some reason for optimism in this whole mess. Let me explain.

The unravelling of public morality may be part of a larger pattern that God has in mind for us. Some people observe that all societies go through cycles of renewal, growth, decadence, and crisis followed again by renewal. We seem to be in the fourth phase, the crisis. Two observers of this phenomena, Neil Howe and William Strauss, say that we are now at the Fourth Turning, a time of increasing tension and conflict. It appears a certainty that things will get worse, much worse, before they get better; if at all. There is no certainty that good will triumph, assuming, of course, that only people are in charge.

This is where we can find some cause for optimism. I am reminded that God is in charge, not us. If we remain faithful to God and keep faith with him, we can be part of the forces that ensure that good will triumph. Even if the crisis results widespread destruction, our role as Christians is to preserve the light of the Gospel and be part of the renewal. We are called to remain faithful to God. Whatever happens, I believe that He will be with us as we help the world recover from the mess we are in.

We are to be the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World. Rest assured, Jesus will fulfill God's Law.

Thank You.