

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

II. "Making Holes in the Darkness"

9-17-06

Ken Peterson

Mtt. 5:13-16

INTRODUCTION

I read the story of a presbytery evangelism conference at which the speaker asked, "What is the greatest contribution to world evangelization that the Presbyterian Church has to offer?" The room was silent, and then finally a woman timidly raised her hand. "Could it be restraint?" she offered.

We can be thankful that this has not always been the case. If I remember correctly, up through the first half of the last century, the Presbyterian Church was the largest missionary-sending organization in the world with over 5,000 missionaries. All across the world, the evidence is still there, but nowhere more powerfully displayed than in the thriving Korean church.

But restraint and evangelism do, unfortunately, go together for a lot of us— Presbyterian or not. Words like witness, testify, and evangelism can feel frightening when they are coupled with "you," as in, "Would you please witness to Jane?" Many of us confess to feeling some discomfort about getting out there in the world, reaching out to bring others to know Christ.

On the other hand, maybe you've been turned-off by some of the ways you've seen Christians doing evangelism and you don't want to be identified with their pushy ways. I know I've been made to feel very guilty by some who are *very aggressive* in their witnessing. I've been taken on witness-forays into the world to show me how it's done. And, mostly I've been embarrassed by their aggressive ways and bad manners— leaving me unconvinced that it is the way Christ taught us. While I admit to plenty of cowardice, and I am often ashamed of my failures to speak up for Jesus, I draw considerable guidance and encouragement from these two metaphors Jesus uses in this morning's Scripture.

Last week, we began this series of sermons on Jesus' overview of what He's up to, what following Him looks like, in His Sermon on the Mount in Mtt. 5-7. It is, in words of Oswald Chambers, "*A statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us.*" These carefully chosen words are the first extensive teaching in Matthew's Gospel— a summation of Christian living. Last Sunday, we looked at Jesus' eight opening statements called "the Beatitudes." They are startling, turning everything upside down from the way this world looks at things. They give us a portrait of what it means to be a Christian. But remember the last beatitude,

*Blessed are those who the persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

After expanding upon that, saying persecution or rejection should not intimidate us, only encourage us, Jesus now moves on to what can be seen as a commissioning or even ordination of these newly chosen disciples with two powerful, "You are" statements. Two carefully chosen

metaphors define the ministry of the believer. Let's look at them.

13 *"You are the salt of the earth.*

But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?

It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

14 *"You are the light of the world.*

A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.*

Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

16 *In the same way, let your light shine before men,*

that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

"YOU ARE..."

The two "You are's" are arresting. Jesus has just assured the disciples of God's blessing in the most difficult, troubling events of life. Now He lets them know their purpose, their usefulness to the world. It is important to note that the "You are's" are strongly emphasized in the Greek. One way of placing emphasis on the "you" is by placing it at the head of the sentence in Greek. Yet, it is given even stronger emphasis by being stated at all, since in Greek pronominal subjects do not have to be expressed, only implied. So, by using the pronoun and then placing it first in the sentence makes it doubly accented.

I'm also struck by the fact that Jesus is not saying, "You should be...or try to be," but, "you are!" Jesus is saying, "I believe in you." And, He gives us our definition as a Christian— who we are. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is expansive— not just Galilee or Palestine, but gives a big picture encompassing everyone: "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." This is BIG.

Too often, we tend to look at our witness as something we do (or ought to do) as a Christian. Jesus is clearly declaring that witnessing is not an activity we may or may not engage in. If you are a Christian, you are a witness. And, is it fair to turn it around and say, "If you are not a witness, you are not a Christian?" It is worth thinking about.

The two defining metaphors Jesus chooses to define our role are salt and light. Both are penetrators. Both, influence out of all proportion to their size or amount. This is who we are and what we are to be about as Christians. Let's reflect on what they say.

SALT

Salt is an apt metaphor for the Christian in four ways.

First, salt preserves. Before refrigeration, it was critical. Rubbed into meat it keep it from spoiling, from being corrupted by bacteria. In this sense, in the world, Christians restrain evil and corruption by their influence. They hold back the pollution of sin. Think of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). God says He wouldn't have destroyed them if could find as few as ten righteous people in them. In other words, there was hope as long as there were ten God-fearing people among a population that must

have been several thousand, since they were “great cities.”

Sometimes I get a half-hearted apology from someone swearing, “Sorry, Reverend, about my language.” While I certainly don’t appreciate crudeness or profanity, that is really only the surface issue. The heart is far more important. However, it does show some sensitivity in behavior– maybe a “salt effect” in a superficial way. Wherever we are, is there less gossip, less prejudice and put-downs, more love and grace present?

At times, we see the bold stand of Christians thwarting terrible evil in our world. Chuck Colson tells of a riot at Washington D.C.’s Lorton prison. Inmates were burning buildings and armed, menacing gangs roamed the grounds. But in the main prison yard a group of Christian inmates stood in a huge circle, arms linked, singing hymns. Their circle enclosed a group of guards as well as prisoners seeking protection. The courageous stand of these Christian inmates saved a number of lives.

Second, salt purifies and promotes healing. It has a cleansing action in wounds. Soaking a wound in salt water draws out the poisons. We gargle with salt water for a sore throat. Wherever Christians are, they destroy germs of sin in the world. Someone said,

"We are not called to be the honey of the world but the salt of the earth. Salt stings on an open wound, but it also saves one from gangrene."

God’s Word must be in our hearts to keep us pure and enable us to be a purifying influence. Ps 119:9 & 11 expresses it well:

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word....
I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.*

Third, salt flavors, it adds zest to bland foods. It enhances what’s good about food.

The Message puts it, *You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.* Christians should add zest to life, combating blandness and dullness. A dull Christian ought to be a contradiction of terms. Whenever we are present, life should be enhanced in all the best ways. People should feel encouraged, more joyful, filled with hope, and undergirded with peace. We should be intellectually stimulating and igniting spiritual longings.

Fourth, salt was valuable. The word for salary comes from “sal”– “salt.” It was a precious commodity in Jesus’ day. Roman soldiers were paid with a sack of salt. That makes this a statement of how valuable disciples are. They have great worth in Jesus’ eyes.

Now, salt is meant to penetrate. Salt one centimeter from food does no good. It must be mixed in. Have you ever baked bread and forgotten the salt? Yes, you can try to sprinkle a little on your slice of bread, but it really doesn’t work very well, does it? It needs to be mixed in, intensely involved in the medium. Becky Pippert wrote an excellent book on evangelism, and called it, Out of the Salt Shaker. Often times as Christians, we like to clump together in our churches, the salt

shaker. Maybe all our friends, all our social life are with other believers like us. Becky's point is, if we are salt, we can't be content to insulate ourselves from the world. We need to be getting out in the world, making ourselves vulnerable, trusting God to use what He's created us to be to penetrate and make a difference. Where in your life are you mixing in with the world to be salt?

Jesus also conveys a warning: salt can lose its tang, or its saltiness. Applied to people, we can think of words like insipid, blah, lukewarm. None of us wants that kind of Christianity. The most modest estimates from surveys suggest at least one-fourth of the population of the U.S. professes an evangelical conversion experience. William Iverson wryly observes:

"A pound of meat would surely be affected by a quarter pound of salt. If this is real Christianity, the 'salt of the earth,' where is the effect of which Jesus spoke?"

I think there's little question that much of the salt has lost its savor. If Christians were what they are supposed to be, there is no way our land would be so polluted by sin. Christians have blindly accepted what Peter Kreeft refers to as the sociological gobbledegook of "Appropriate Behavior," or "Acceptable Behavior" rather than plain moral common sense. We have indiscriminate abortion, the acceptance of homosexual acts as simply "alternative life-styles," and people who consider themselves Christians sexually active outside marriage. We are self-centered and are amassing of more and more things for ourselves while most of the world suffers from hunger and inadequate housing. And the list goes on. How different is your lifestyle, your values, your character, and the way you spend your money than that of the world?

Jesus warns of judgement. How can it be made salty again? It is not good for anything and thus will be thrown out. Perhaps Jesus is referring to the Jewish custom for Jews who had lost their faith and became apostate. Part of their restitution if they returned to the faith was to lie down on the threshold of the door to the synagogue and have people walk on him. As they stepped on him, he would say, "Trample on me who am salt which has lost its savor."

Bonhoeffer, the Christian martyr of Nazi Germany, commenting on this passage says, "either we follow the call or we are crushed beneath it." He certainly obeyed the call and illustrated faithfulness. Imprisoned by the Nazis and eventually executed by them, his guards had to be constantly changed because he kept converting them to Christ.

LIGHT

Like salt, light has an effect out of all proportion to amount. A tiny nightlight can be the most useful light in your house. Here is a second metaphor to suggest the influence and role of the disciple in the world. The kingdom of God is light and the kingdom of this world is darkness. Wherever Christians are, they are to bring light, to stand out and bless others by that light. Jesus says that light is shown forth in good deeds, the works we do:

"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (16)

Robert Louis Stevenson recorded a childhood incident in his diary. He was seated by a window watching the lamplighter light the gas street lights. His nurse came into room and asked what he was doing. Robert replied, "I'm watching a man make holes in the darkness."

That is not a bad description of our calling. Wherever we are in the darkness of our world—amidst the fear, the drivenness, the loneliness, the emptiness, the search for meaning— we are commissioned to make holes, creating little islands of light in the darkness.

Again, this metaphor is accompanied by a warning about not hiding our light under a bushel basket. Then we deny our purpose and our God-given role in the world. It can be uncomfortable to stand out as a light. It makes us feel vulnerable and can invite attack. What we expose in others may not be pleasant and may precipitate anger or resentment. People may be uncomfortable around us if their deeds are evil. Sinful structures of society may seek to destroy us.

Salt and light both work by sacrificing, giving themselves and not trying to preserve themselves. For salt it is secret and unseen. Here one thinks of a faithful Christian influence in the family or in the work place— quietly, prayerfully, lovingly living the Christ-life— penetrating, influencing out of all proportion to what anyone would expect. In light we see more of an open, public, visible witness to the Gospel— proclaiming His Word, doing the works of Jesus toward saving, healing and delivering in hurting places of world. It will expose the lies and evil of darkness. Yet, neither salt or light are aggressive or pushy. They just are what they are. I find that reassuring. We simply need to keep from losing who and what we are.

CONCLUSION

Cameron Townsend was born in California in 1896. At the age of 12, he joined the Presbyterian church where his family attended. Afterward, his father, who was deaf, took him out to the barn and questioned him about his faith to be sure his son really had a personal faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. Cameron wrote out the answers for his father to his father's satisfaction.

In 1917, Cameron went to Guatemala to sell Spanish Bibles to the Cakchiquel Indians. But the Indians were offended by his efforts. One Indian asked him, "If your God is so smart, why hasn't he learned our language?" The question burned in Cameron's mind until he decided to translate the gospel of Mark into Cakchiquel. Twelve years later, when he completed it, the Cakchiquels exclaimed, "Now God speaks our language."

His work was interrupted by illness when he contracted tuberculosis and his wife developed a life-threatening heart condition. They returned to California to recuperate. Meanwhile, a new Socialist president expelled all foreign missionaries from Mexico. A missionary friend, L. L. Legters, urged him to try to return to Mexico when he recovered since there were at least 50 Indian tribes without a Bible in their language.

Legters traveled to New Jersey to America's Keswick Bible conference where he shared his and Cameron's hope for translating the Bible into tribal languages. The director declared Aug. 10, 1933 as a day of prayer and fasting for this work in Mexico. So sure were these intercessors of God's answer to their prayers, they urged Cameron and Legters to immediately go to Mexico and seek permission to do their translation work. Through a series of amazing contacts, they finally gained entrance and permission to continue their translations. Then they returned to America,

where in a barn in Arkansas they organized a three-month translation school to train Bible translators. They called it Camp Wycliffe, after the first translator of the Bible into English. There, in that barn, sitting on nail kegs, three students studied with four faculty members to prepare. Then Cameron returned to Mexico with his students and they began translating the Bible into tribal languages. From that barn, Wycliffe Bible Translators has grown to be the largest independent Protestant mission agency in the world. At the time of Cameron's death in 1982, half of the world's 5,000 languages had the Bible in their language because Cameron Townsend was willing to be part of the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus is telling us who we are and what our mission is. It doesn't have to be flashy or pushy. We just need to be who we are. These are quiet metaphors. Too often we confine the idea of witness to a presentation of the Gospel for salvation. While that is important— meditating on these metaphors opens a much broader, more creative interaction with the world.

What would being salt in your world— your close relationships, your casual and occasional encounters, where you work, where you play? Then also reflect upon what it would look like for you to be a light shining in those same places. The effect will be out of all proportion of what we can even imagine. Don't miss your purpose!

In closing, The Message expresses these last verses as:

If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

— Matt 5:15-16 (MSG)