



### **Method: Our Wesleyan Way Worship Series**

Sermon Title: "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount"

Matthew 5:13-20—9 February 2014

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jesus' Beatitudes begin a section in Matthew's Gospel we know as the Sermon on the Mount. It is the longest of five sections in Matthew known as Jesus' speeches, sermons, or discourses. This Sermon on the Mount consists of Matthew chapters 5-7. Hear the day's lesson:

13 "You are the salt of the earth; 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.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:13-20).

In our lesson (Matthew 5:13-16) Jesus calls followers "salt" and "light." Rather than addressing each of the various allusions/metaphors Jesus offers, instead may we focus on the first two? Jesus provides a double identity to those listening: you are the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." Of all the comparisons in the Sermon on the Mount, these two address the hearer's identity. For persons who take up this Realm of God lifestyle, they become how the world sees and experiences God. For this reason they are the "light of the world." Also the way disciples help transform the world describes them as the "salt of the earth."

When Jesus calls followers "light," it is simple enough for us to understand. Our actions, Jesus suggests, make known to the world that our



actions are honorable because they are good actions. Perhaps we can inspire others by our example. Maybe our light and our seasoning can stir others to hear the gospel?

What about “salt?” What does it mean to be “salt of the earth?” In the Tuesday night Bible study we point out that context is everything. The Bible is at least 2000-3000+ years old and we recognize that ancient culture was unlike ours. Jesus means something when he says: “You are the salt of the earth.” In fact salt is a loaded term because I discovered that there are at least sixty different uses for salt—even in today’s world. Accordingly, our question might be: “how did the ancients use salt?”

Salt was in use long before recorded history. Since the dawn of time, animals have instinctively forged trails to natural salt sources to satisfy their need for salt. Ancient hunters obtained salt from animal meat. As the ancient’s diet improved, salt (maybe as sea water) gave vegetables a similar flavor to meat. Over many millennia, humans learned how salt preserved food, cured hides, and healed wounds. Nomadic bands traded salt with other tribes for various goods (<http://www.saltsense.co.uk/history01.php>).

Our diet needs salt. Civilization processed its own salt as it became settled. Salt-making became its own industry and people used salt extensively in trade and as payment for labor. As a result, salt had great value in ancient societies, especially since it was less accessible than it is today. You might also remember the scene in a feature film, and academy Award winning film by the way, that depicts modern Indian history. In an important scene Mahatma Gandhi leads the “Salt March” to the sea as a protest. He urged Indians to manufacture their own salt from the sea and thereby avoid the tax on it. The



British forbade making salt to protect its monopoly on salt production.

The Bible contains numerous references to salt. In various contexts, the Bible uses salt symbolically to signify permanence, loyalty, durability, fidelity, usefulness, value, and purification. It was also used as an element of ceremonial offerings, and as a unit of exchange. When Jesus says, “You are the salt of the world,” he suggests that salt preserves from corruption and disciples preserve the world from depravity.

So God in Jesus calls us to preserve the world from corruption. How exactly are we to do that? By remaining in the world and letting our “salt” season and our “light” shine. The salt and the light work together in harmony. We keep our covenants and help others to see that their covenants are binding too. We know that only God can warm and transform hearts, but it is our business as disciples to plant some salty seeds and watch God give them growth.

At my house we have a couple of salt blocks. I have moved them around and they weigh a good bit. I have learned while watching animals that not only do they need salt to live—just like human beings, but there is another reason for the salt blocks. A reason animal caretakers left blocks of salt in the field was so the animals would lick the salt, get thirsty, and then drink water. Otherwise they may not drink enough water. When the Bible says we are the salt of the earth, perhaps it might mean that if we are the salt of the earth, when we meet people and they encounter “our salt” they may develop a thirst for the things of God.

Questions, as you know, are tricky things. They can deflect attention or divert scrutiny. It is a rather notable strategy to get out of tight places.



When someone asks a question we cannot answer, then a good technique of argumentation is to return a probing question. Sometimes it is merely a way to delay the inevitable.

Thus an important question for us today is “If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? (Matthew 5:13). If asked this question I might say our path to restoration after losing our “saltiness” is best traveled with a return to the basics of Christians practice—sometimes we call this the practice the Christian disciplines.

We will soon come to Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday (5 March 2014) and Lent is an appropriate season to practice spiritual disciplines. As exercise is good for the body, so are the disciplines good for our spirits and souls. Author/pastor Richard Foster (*Celebration of Discipline*, 1984) identifies twelve key spiritual disciplines. These are:

- Prayer
- Meditation
- Fasting
- Study
- Simplicity
- Submission

- Solitude
- Service
- Confession
- Guidance
- Celebration
- Worship

We have a member of our congregation in Sochi at the Olympic and I ask you to keep Al Henkel in your prayers. Thinking about Al today and restoring the saltiness of the Christian life I recalled a story I once read. The Greeks had



a unique race in their Olympic games. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit (J. Stowell, *Fan the Flame*, Moody, 1986, p. 32).

We want to run all the way with the flame of our torch still lit for Christ—because we are the “light of the world” and we are the “salt of the earth.”

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