



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for June 21, 2020
“From the Mount: Salt and Light”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

*“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 underfoot.
“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.
In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)*

Knowing Who We Are

Some of you have taken the Myers Briggs Personality Assessment. Others of you may have taken the Enneagram Personality Test. For those who are about to be married I administer a Pre-marital Inventory called Prepare and Enrich. There’s an abbreviated personality assessment built in.

Personality assessments are just one way to get a sense of who we are. Nailing down our identity isn’t always the easiest thing to do. Assessments aside, some are known by their vocation, others by some accomplishment, and still others as the parents of their kids. In some circles I am identified as a United Methodist pastor, in others I’m recognized as Brian and John’s dad, and in still others, Cheryl’s husband. Hopefully, in all circles, I am known as a person deeply devoted to Christ.

Knowing who we are and, even more importantly, whose we are is an important issue for life. Some spend their whole lives trying to figure that out. How is your identity defined?

Considering Our Own Identity

Jesus spoke quite a bit about identity. On occasion he would talk his identity. On other occasions he would let others share what they thought about his identity. At one point Jesus claimed to be *“the light of the world.”* (John 8:12) At another point he claimed to be *“the good shepherd.”* (John 10:11)

Jesus, the Son of God, knew who he was.

Just as Jesus talked about his own identity, he was quick to talk about ours. He does so right out of the gate in his Sermon on the Mount. He uses two really compelling images. He claims that we are both *“the salt of the earth”* and *“the light of the world.”*

On the surface Christ’s reference to salt and light is seemingly easy to understand. On a much deeper level, it leaves us with a lot to ponder.

The Salt of the Earth Enliven Things

So let’s dig a little deeper into what it means to be *“the salt of the earth”* and *“the light of the world.”*

First, salt enlivens whatever it seasons. I find myself using way too much salt. In spite of warnings to cut back, I sprinkle it on just about everything. It really does make things taste better. It really brings food to life. I feel for those who are on a low sodium diet. Their food just can't taste as good.

By identifying his followers as *"the salt of the earth"* Jesus essentially says that those who follow him have a way of enlivening things around them. With Christ's help and in his power we really do have the opportunity to make a difference. In Christ our lives become different and as we reach out in his name the lives of those around us become different as well.

Never doubt your influence.

The Salt of the Earth Work to Preserve

"You are the salt of the earth," says Jesus.

Not only does salt enliven whatever it seasons, it also has the ability to preserve. For centuries, meat was preserved by using salt. Without refrigeration, meat was made safe for long periods of time by curing it with salt. Salt has a way of keeping things from going bad. Let me tell you I am a real fan of country ham. We had some around Christmas last year and it was really, really good.

William Barclay states that those who are *"the salt of the earth"* are like *"a cleansing antiseptic in society."*

Ours is to always strive for good. Ours is to live lives that are becoming those who follow Jesus, which in a lot of ways is contrary to the ways of the world. As a matter of identity, we are called to stand for that which is truly righteous, all the while making *"love our aim."* (I Corinthians 14:1)

That's a great word for the times in which we are living.

"The salt of the earth:"

- Stand strong in the face of injustice.
- Consistently seek to promote the way of love
- Seek to serve however and whenever needed
- Desire to follow Christ at all costs

The Salt of the Earth Are Pure

"You are the salt of the earth," says Jesus.

Salt not only enlivens and preserves, but in and of itself is pure. I am particularly struck by that notion. Salt has always been considered pure. The Romans thought salt was pure in that it came from the sea and the sun.

One of the Beatitudes we read last week talked about being *"pure in heart."* *"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God,"* says Jesus. (Matthew 5:8) When our hearts are pure we are able to experience God more deeply.

Paul writes to Timothy in I Timothy 4:19, *“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and **in purity.**”*

“The salt of the earth” make these things a way of life. They don’t succumb to the temptation of lowering the bar. They are the ones who stay steady.

I have often used the phrase *“the salt of the earth”* at funerals to refer to those persons who have displayed the sort of steady, dependable way of life you would expect from a person who is a follower of Christ. They were not so much conflicted by the temptations of this world. You could tell they just had pure heart. They lived wonderful lives. As a group they were never flashy or boastful.

These *“salt of the earth”* folk were always ready to serve, always ready to make a witness, always ready to reflect God’s good work in their lives, and all of that flowed from a pure heart. You just knew that Christ was very much a part of their lives and their purity of heart was nothing short of inspiring. That’s the way it is for those who are *“the salt of the earth.”*

Losing Our Saltiness

Christ though knew that even though salt, in and of itself, was pure, it could become contaminated. In fact, he talked about salt losing its saltiness. He knew that just as salt could lose its saltiness it was possible for people to lose their saltiness as well. It was possible for them to stray away from their first calling, hence his reason for talking about *“salt losing its saltiness.”*

During the days of Christ most of the salt used in the region where he lived came from the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is one of the saltiest bodies of water in the world. I have been to the Dead Sea. In fact, I swam in it. Better put, I floated in it. You can’t sink in the Dead Sea it is so full of minerals.

I understand the Dead Sea is almost 9% saltier than any ocean. Its salt, though, can become so full of impurities it can lose a good deal of its flavor. The people of Christ’s day were aware of that.

We need to stand guard so our *“saltiness”* doesn’t get compromised by things other than the *“purity”* of God’s truth. We need to stand strong so that the things of this world don’t draw us away from who he wants us to be.

If we don’t seek to stay true to the high calling that is ours in Christ, we flirt with losing the very identity that is ours in him. We become someone different than Christ intended us to be. In a word, we run the risk of losing our *“saltiness.”*

Jesus sees it this way. Salt that has lost its saltiness *“is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”*

Let’s be on guard never to lose our *“saltiness.”*

You Are the Light of the World

“You are the light of the world,” says Jesus. This too is our identity.

Even on the darkest night those of us with almost unlimited access to electricity take light for granted. We go to the light switch and turn on the lights at will. Those not so fortunate know what darkness is and know what a difference even one small light can make.

I learned that pretty quickly upon visiting Africa. The village I visited there turned pretty dark at night, in fact, it was pitch dark.

If you have ever taken a trip out west and traveled through Kansas at night you know that light has a way of being seen for miles. A city on the Kansas plain can be seen from a long way off.

From high above earth at night, whether in an airplane or in a spacecraft, you get a sense of just how much light stands out when it's dark.

Light does indeed pierce the darkness.

John talks about the coming of Christ in the prologue to his gospel. He talks in terms of Jesus being light. *"In him was life,"* he says, *"and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."* (John 1:4-5)

Just a bit later John writes in John 1:9-10, *"The true light that gives light to everything was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not recognize him."* (John 1:9-10)

As we said a few minutes ago, John records Jesus saying this about himself, *"I am the light of the world,"* he says. *"Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus claims the same for you and me. *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 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."*

Let your light so shine before others, that they should see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Let Your Light So Shine

The message is this: We shine because Jesus shines through us and because he shines through us the darkness around us is illuminated.

Christ's light shines through us so others might see him.

"Lord, I pray that people not see me, but you shining through me." That's a fabulous prayer and one we need to be praying all the time.

Let the light of Christ so shine in you that the lives of those around you are brightened, and as their lives are brightened, may it be that Christ gains all the praise and glory.

The old children's song puts it well. *"This little light of mine I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine."*

Hide it under a bushel, no. I'm gonna let it shine. Hide it under a bushel, no. I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine."

"You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world." This is your identity in Christ.