

Jesus' Greatest Sermon: Salt & Light

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
February 9, 2014

Psalm 112:1-9; Matthew 5:13-20

There's an old legend that says when Jesus returned to heaven following his time on earth, he was asked by an angel: "Who have you left on earth to carry out the work of the Almighty?"

Jesus answered, "A little band of men and women who love me."

The angel said, "But what if they fail when the difficulties come? Will all you have done be defeated?"

Jesus responded, "Yes, if they fail, then all I have done will be defeated."

The angel asked, "Then there is nothing more?"

Jesus answered, "No, there is nothing more....but they will not fail."

"You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." They will not fail.

I had a tough conversation with a church member not long ago – the kind of conversation no minister likes to have. This person, relatively new to church, had gotten very involved, indeed had been quite helpful in a number of areas, but was now feeling a bit overwhelmed, feeling the need to pull back, maybe stay away from church for a while. No hostility, no anger...just a little burned out and feeling the need to step back and rethink priorities.

It happens. It makes me sad, but it happens. Perhaps some of you have felt that way from time to time, are feeling that way right now. "If Gene calls, I'm not home!" I'm sure there are Sundays when you come to church and it seems like we are busy trying to get you to *do* something: volunteer here, give something there, stay for a meeting, save this date...you ought, you must, you should. I hope your experience of church can be a bit more positive than that, but there are times...Church in the imperative mode – do this.

And then we come to our text for today – familiar words from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You are salt...you are light...No should, ought or must. This is the Gospel made personal. Jesus doesn't say we ought to be salt or should be light. He says we *are* salt; we *are* light. He doesn't tell us what we should be; he affirms what we already are. It is in our nature to savor the world with the Gospel, to shine with the light of the Gospel. Briny and bright as our call to worship said.

I once saw this sign in a church: "You may be the only Bible someone reads." I shuttered when I read that...not too sure how I feel about that. Not sure this is something I signed up for...my life as an expression, an embodiment, of the Gospel of Christ? My life as the only light someone in a dark world may ever see? That's not me. I'm just a guy. Salt and light...How can that be me?

I heard a sermon in which the minister said something like this: "I know that you think you are here this morning because you chose to be here. You are people of good habits and you came out of habit. Perhaps you were searching for a bit of a boost in your life and thought you might get it here. But what if you are here this morning because God put you here? What if the work you are doing you are not doing for yourself? What if the life you are living is not your own? What if you came here looking for light, here to worship the Light of the World, only to have Jesus tell you that you are to be light to the world?"

This text functions as an unexpected and perhaps not entirely welcome wake-up call. It reminds us what we carry in our bones – the living presence of God, a God who bids us be salt in this world in all our savory particularity; to be light in the way that only we can blaze.

In one of his best-selling books, Robert Fulghum talked about Alexander Papaderos. Papaderos grew up in Greece, raised as a child in a remote village by parents who were very poor. If you had known him in his youth, you would have thought, "Just a guy...nothing extraordinary about him."

One day, during the German occupation of Greece in World War II, a German motorcycle wrecked in Papaderos' village. He was just a boy then, but he described how he found broken pieces of a mirror that had been attached to the handlebar. It was so shattered that he could not put it back together, so he kept the largest piece of the mirror. Little by little, he worked with that fragment until it was about the size of a quarter, which he could easily carry in his pocket wherever he went. He loved how he could use it to reflect sunlight into dark places where the sun could never shine.

Years passed and Papaderos became an honored and respected political leader, renowned for his efforts as a peacemaker and for bringing justice to the poor and afflicted. He once was asked to reflect on the meaning of his life. Reaching into his pocket he took out a small mirror, the one he found as a boy. He shared how he had acquired this mirror and how it became a game for him to use it to reflect light into dark places. Then he said this: “As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but actually what I might do with my life...Light, that is truth, understanding, and knowledge, is here, but it will only shine if I reflect it. I am only a fragment of a mirror, a mirror whose design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world, into the dark places of the human heart, and perhaps change some things in people. This is what I am about, this is the meaning of life to me.”

Does a great man like Alexander Papaderos seem too distant? I can never be like him. Well, how about this. A few weeks ago a young boy, eight years old, came into the church office with his mother. She said he had saved some money and wanted to give it to something that helped people. Fortunately Joyce Cox from our Mission and Outreach Board was in the office that day. She told the boy about our ongoing outreach to the homeless – monthly lunches, weekly sack lunches, showers, bus passes, food, etc. He liked that – said he would like to support that. So he handed Joyce over \$150 to help the homeless. I am still moved by the thought of little hands saving each precious coin, then giving it all away. No one told him to be salt, to be light. He already knew it. It was a marvelous, generous expression of who he already was.

So...how savory have you been lately? How has light found its way into you and through you? Because it’s there...it’s there. Perhaps our 125 days of caring can be, not just one more thing the church is telling you do, but a chance to express your inner light, your innate saltiness.

Now I know I am not saying anything particularly new this morning. You know this text and have heard sermons on this text. And yet, I believe we need to keep saying it. I think of our children. How are we going to keep them or our grandchildren in the faith, how are we going to raise up a new generation of followers of Jesus, if we don’t keep saying it. And not only saying it, but also living it – being who we are, letting our light shine for all to see. For they are paying attention.

The other day I was working on the computer at home when the screen suddenly went blank. When it came back on, I had lost everything I was working on. I uttered a loud expletive expressing my anger. Our grandson, Ben, was staying with us and heard me. He immediately rushed to Betty saying, “Grandpa said a bad word!” They are paying attention, not only to the bad stuff, but also to the times when our light does shine. Yes, we need to keep saying it and living it because as its heart, in spite of all the madness and craziness and lostness that would pull us in other directions and have us forget who we are, at its heart... this is what life really is – being salt and light.

And I think this is what people really want – to be able to express this deep truth about themselves, to be salt and light in the world. A college chaplain shares this story: “We had this recruiter come to campus from the “Teach for America” program, a program which attempts to recruit bright young students from America’s college campuses to give two years of their lives in teaching children in some of America’s most difficult and deprived school systems. (that’s how our older daughter ended up teaching in rural Louisiana outside Baton Rouge) To an auditorium full of Duke University seniors, the recruiter said, ‘Looking at you tonight, I don’t know why I am here. You are privileged, the beneficiaries of the best of this nation’s educational resources. I can tell, just by looking at you, that you are all bound for Wall Street, law school, med school. And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year working in some of the worst school situations in America, begging you to waste your life for a bunch of kids in the backwoods of Appalachia or the inner city of Philadelphia. I must have been crazy to come here.

“ ‘But I do have some literature and I would be willing to talk to anybody who happens to be interested. But I know that all of you want to be a success and here I am inviting you into something where you might very well fail. So feel free to leave, but if by chance there is anybody here who is interested, then I’m here to talk to you.’

Says the chaplain, “With that, everyone stood up and stampeded to the front, wanting so much to give their lives to something more interesting than conventional American success; wanting so much to give themselves to something bigger and more important than themselves.”

You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. Dream big about that. Take courage and faithfully live it. And we will not fail.