

Matthew 5:13-16

“The Essential Elements”

Preaching from a well-known passage can be both a blessing and a curse. The blessing comes from the fact that everyone knows that passage so well, including the preacher, that we all have a preconceived notion with regards to its meaning. The curse comes from the fact that everyone knows that passage so well, including the preacher, that we all have a preconceived notion with regards to its meaning. So, I was blessed to discover something completely new in these familiar words with the help of the Holy Spirit.

You see, while studying these words from Jesus’ most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, I discovered that Christ talks about salt and light as a reference to OUR part of the covenant that God made when he chose the Hebrews to be his people. The words reflect the covenant with Abraham as well as the specific blessings and curses that God shared with Moses before God finally allowed His People to enter into the Holy Land.

To refresh our memories: God called Abraham to be the father of the Israelites. Scriptures don’t really tell us WHY he chose Abraham or WHY he chose the Hebrews. But God says to him: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

That was God’s part of the covenant and many Christians know it well. But what people tend to forget, including the Israelites, is THEIR part of the covenant. Which of course is also ours. That is why Jesus refers to the concept here in his sermon as it was first spoken by the prophet Isaiah. “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the

hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” The Israelites remembered well that God had given them the land but tended to forget that they were supposed to share God’s blessings by being a light that would lead others to God.

So right now, this very minute, close your eyes and think of some of the blessings God has given you. *Pause* Now, if this were the “Time with Young Disciples” I would ask you all to call out some of your answers. So let’s give that a try.

Friends, the gifts that God has given us individually and corporately are too many to name. If I asked every person here to name JUST ONE, we might sit here until this afternoon’s Bake Auction. We have received specific people, this church, our health, our freedom, and of course, salvation through God’s grace to name a few. And in return, the Israelites AND you and I are called to give salt and light to the world. This helps us fulfill our part of the covenant.

Now, in our modern-day society, salt may seem a little odd to name as a gift. But in Biblical times there was no refrigeration, no grocery store freezer sections and no Yeti coolers. So salt was used as a preservative. Of course, salt also adds flavor to things. Anyone who struggles with blood pressure issues knows how hard it is to cut down on salt if your doctor has told you to. It has been my experience that everything tastes so bland until you get used to it or find another substitute.

But Jesus tells us to be sure to use it. You see, the salt of 1st century Palestine was not pure like our salt. It was often mixed with other elements. And because of this, if it was not used, it often lost its flavor and had to be thrown out.

Jesus wants us to think about the gifts, the blessings, that God has given us each minute and USE them to glorify God. Because if we don’t, they might lose their flavor or their abilities, and we will have to discard them as useless. What a waste of God’s miracles that would be!

You see, as God's disciples, we have a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth with our saltiness.

When I think of a person who used their saltiness, I cannot help but think of Lee Orr, whose resurrection we celebrated yesterday. For those of you who were not blessed to know Lee, she died suddenly at the age of 87. And right up to her death, even in her last week on earth, she was teaching Sunday School here at Nazareth and giving flying lessons. In

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Lee also shared her salty personality by telling you exactly what she thought and shared her vast knowledge of the Bible by not only teaching it but living it. The world would be poorer if Lee had kept her saltiness to herself and ultimately had to throw it away. So instead, she glorified God and shared God's gifts right up until the time God called her home.

But those of us who have learned to live curtailing our use of salt may not find this so threatening so Jesus continues his words about our part of the covenant by saying, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify God."

Friends, I cannot imagine a world with no light. Talk to someone who is totally or even partially blind to find out how hard it is to navigate the world. However, one of the most remarkable women I have ever met was when I led the Women's Retreat for Tryon Presbyterian church just last year. At our first organizational meeting, I could not help but notice that one lady had the menu read to her. But many restaurants are dark, even during the day, and I often pull out my cell phone and use the flashlight to see a menu. So I didn't think much more about it.

But when her food came, her friend told her, "Your meat is on the right at about three o'clock, the salad is at the top" and on and on. It was then that I realized that she was blind. The

lady, whom I will call Mary, suffered from retinitis pigmentosa, a condition that caused her to lose her sight at the age of 11. Yet, she had gone on to be an opera singer in New York City, she played the piano, the guitar, she rode horses and had gotten married and had children, was an Elder on the steering committee for this retreat.

That's because Mary understood that Jesus is talking about our INNER light. Not the lights from the candles of his day or our modern-day light fixtures or headlights on cars or the light of a computer screen. God has placed GOD'S light of love and grace and mercy and justice within each of our hearts. And our part of the covenant is to discover that light and to shine it on and for God.

One of the dangers of this is that we forget who we are shining the light on. Author Philip Yancey quotes from a lecture that Dr. Paul Brand once gave. Brand is known for his extensive work with modern day lepers and his subsequent contributions to the field of hand surgery. He and Yancey actually co-authored a book on the gift of pain.

Brand was speaking to a medical college in India on these words from the Sermon on the Mount. In front of the lectern was an oil lamp, with its cotton wick burning from the shallow dish of oil. As he preached, the lamp ran out of oil, the wick burned dry, and the smoke made him cough. He immediately used the opportunity.

"Some of us here are like this wick," he said. "We're trying to shine for the glory of God, but we stink. That's what happens when we use ourselves as the fuel of our witness rather than the Holy Spirit. Wicks can last indefinitely, burning brightly and without irritating smoke, if the fuel, the Holy Spirit, is in constant supply."

His story helps us remember that we shine WITH God's light but and in a way that glorifies God's work in us, not claiming our gifts to be our own. But I believe Jesus chose this

metaphor to remind us of the role of light in our gathered community. Individual light enables us to see colors, helps vegetation grow, provides power and more. But I believe Jesus is reminding us that our collective light is a light that can and should mirror God's light and enable the world to see God's justice and mercy.

When we put God's light together as a body of Christ, we can better see the diversity of our world and appreciate its beauty. We can be guided to shine on the areas in our society which need to refocus their energies in God and God's purposes. Jesus tells us that our light comes FROM God and should shine back on God. And think how bright that light is when we put it together with the light from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Here's an example. Can any of us imagine the Soup Kitchen without Chuck Holmes? Here at Nazareth, the two are almost synonymous. If we have leftover food, as we did Wednesday night after Bible Study, our minds say, "Call Chuck. He'll take it to the soup kitchen." I have no doubt that Chuck delivers it as a gift from the WHOLE church, not just himself. Yet, it is HIS enthusiasm and dedication that sparks our collective minds to remember the needs of the hungry in this community. What I mean is that his passion for feeding others and been contagious in this church so that we ALL have a desire to share our gifts, following his example.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, "So let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify God." And of course, hunger is not the only need in our world and Chuck is not the only disciple who sets an example at Nazareth.

Friends, the world is full of darkness. Political darkness can be seen in the disunity of our own nation and the absurdity of our elected officials who often spend their entire term campaigning for the next one. Economic darkness can be seen in the disparity of society. Social

darkness can be seen in the pervasiveness of the media's definitions of beauty which only takes into account the outer self and not the more important inner self. Judgement is rampant when we don't understand why people love who they love without shame and our inability to see that it is just none of our business!

I could go on and on. But rather, let us each determine in our own hearts to discover WHAT our personal light is and then let our lights shine. May each member of the body of Christ at Nazareth listen to the Holy Spirit so that we can shine our lights with courage or lift the basket off of our lights if they have been hidden. Collectively, think of the difference that can be made in our church, in our community, and even in our world.

Last week's offering that the Youth took up for Souper Bowl Sunday is a wonderful illustration. You may have put in one quarter or one dollar or one hundred dollars. But together we raised over \$600 dollars to be given to the Middle Tyger Community Center Food Bank to feed our hungry brothers and sisters right here in our corner of the world.

And of course, let us not forget that each of us struggles with an inner darkness. It may be the childhood tapes that play in your mind that tell you that you are not good enough. It may be an inability to forgive yourself or someone else. It may be a struggle with addiction or depression or confusion that you keep hidden so you can live up to others' expectations. It may be that you covet your friend's quick wit or slimmer body or orange Mustang!

But God has created every person here, flaws and all, not only in the image of God, but with an inner light that we are called to discover that will help us overcome these doubts and fears and pains. **That light is the Gospel.** That God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that each of us might live in eternity. Each of us! The sinner, the doubter, the one struggling with self-perception, the alcoholic, the gossiper, the one filled with

covetousness, resentment, or whatever your darkness may be. God's light is the grace of salvation given, even to you and even to me.

When Danny and I were on vacation a couple of weeks ago, we spent the week with some friends on their sailboat in the British Virgin Islands. The last night we were anchored at a particular island, Norman Island. After dinner and getting our pjs on, Danny and I went and laid on the top of the deck, looking at the stars. They are brilliant there because there is no light pollution. They seem to be right on top of you.

I could not help but recall their beautiful light as I wrote about this passage. It also reminded me that sometimes, we have to *have darkness* in order to really appreciate the light. Even in our world. Even in our own lives.

I love this particular island because my father is named Robert Louis Carter after my grandmother's favorite author, Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson's own grandfather once lived on this remote island and wrote letters to young Robert that ultimately enabled him to write his famed Treasure Island. Therefore, let me close with a story about him.

It seems that one night, when Robert's governess came to tuck him in for bed, she found him at the window watching a man light the streetlamps. When she asked what he was doing, her replied, "I'm watching a man punch holes in the darkness." God is our light, living among us and in us. And God is calling us to cut holes in the spiritual darkness of the world, so that others may live and grow and experience the joy that shines in our lives. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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