

**“What Kind of Salt and Light?”  
Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20  
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Jesus’ declaration that we are salt and light is very familiar, like most parts of The Sermon on the Mount. Both of these images have been used as a part of baptismal celebrations here over time and we still use the image of light. Each new believer is told after he/she comes up out of the water that he/she is the light of the world called to shine light before others that they might give glory to God.

We don’t have to get too far into the weeds of how salt is used or what kind of light we are talking about to get the essence of these claims, though many of us who stand behind a pulpit have jumped headlong into these weeds. My mentor once lamented his practice early on in his ministry of preaching on this text while holding up various kinds of light bulbs and then asking which kind of bulb we want to be. We have all preached sermons we would like to forget.

But we don’t have to get into the weeds to get the gist of these images. Jesus is saying that we are called to be different, to be agents of redemption and witnesses to God’s love. We, as followers of Jesus, have a distinctive role to play in this world. But in exactly what way are we called to be distinctive? What kind of salt and light are we supposed to be? What makes a Christian different?

For some people the difference is found in following the old rules of southern piety – don’t drink, dance, smoke or chew, or go with those who do! And there are concerns with excesses here, in addition to basic health concerns with some of these practices. But these are cultural absolutes, not biblical ones. Jesus did not buy in to this sort of thinking at least in regard to drinking wine. And if we’re not careful, we may end up functioning as if God is opposed to anything that even might be fun.

There was a lady in one church I served who contended that the way you can tell if a person really is a Christian is if he/she lets you out in traffic. We might want to just pause here and reflect upon our drive

to church this morning or our drive to and from workplaces and schools this past week. How would we measure up in regard to this criterion? It has some validity in that it points to kindness and selflessness, looking to the needs of others, but it seems a bit too narrow, and how should we regard those people on Glenwood who roar past us knowing the right line will be closed at Five Points? Should we let them in?!

Other people, especially in this time, seem to proceed as if the true measure of Christian faith is holding the correct position on the most important ethical or moral concerns. And ethics and morals certainly matter. Our values should be shaped by our faith. But who decides which issues are the most critical and what the correct positions are? This perspective feels much more like a practice of the Pharisees than a teaching or ministry of Jesus.

And then, there are some who think they can distinguish between the Christians and the non-Christians simply by looking at people. They can see the glimmer in the eye, if not the halo on the head, the bounce in the step, something they can just sense. But most of the time this has more to do with a preferred personality type than anything spiritual. Only God can judge the condition of our hearts and spirits.

So, what kind of salt and light are we called to be? How are followers of Jesus different (assuming that we are)? It is a question that matters greatly, partly because with our witness we are pointing to the character of God and we don't want to drag God's name through the muck (there's been enough of that already in this time), and partly because our culture desperately needs an image of Christian life that can redeem the term "Christian" from utter decay.

I would suggest that we begin by doing something very simple – examine the life and ministry of Jesus and seek to emulate what we see. We see things like the love of God and neighbor; the practice of forgiveness and the pursuit of justice; the inclusion of all people, especially those who have lived on the margins; things like healing and compassion, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and welcoming the stranger; and above all grace, unmerited favor, revealed through the cross but also through the way Jesus treats everyone.

This is not a biased list of isolated practices but a summary of emphases that define Jesus' life. Over and over again he heals the sick, welcomes the outcast, feeds the hungry. Over and over again he calls people to practice forgiveness, consider the needs of the poor, put God first. Words like kindness, compassion, grace, justice, peace, righteousness, healing, wholeness and truth belong in any description of his ministry. And thus, these are the qualities we are called to seek.

But this basic understanding of faithfulness, of what it might mean to be salt and light, is not entirely new with Jesus. It is a fulfillment of ancient teaching in the Hebrew tradition – the Torah, the law, and the prophets. Consider our reading from Isaiah. The prophet begins with a word of judgment. The people have not been faithful to God, they have not been salt and light. They show up for worship, they fast and pray, and yet they don't seem to be experiencing God's blessing. They go to Sunday School and study their lesson, but God doesn't seem to notice.

Why? Because they are not living like God wants them to live. They are not treating other people like God wants them to treat them. They go through the rituals of faith but oppress their workers and ignore people in need. They are like the Baptist deacons in my hometown who were members of the Ku Klux Klan. They are like some leaders in others settings where I have served who owned lucrative businesses and did as little for their employees as possible.

What God desires, says the prophet, is that they loose the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free, that they share their bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into their homes, that they cover the naked and not hide from their own kin... That strikes a bit close to home for some of us. The calling is to extend love and kindness not just to the stranger in need but to the person close to us who drives us crazy and simply wants to take advantage of us... Isaiah has gone from preachin' to meddlin' all the way to just plain crazy!

But this is what it means to be salt and light, to be different in the way God calls us to be. It's to emulate Jesus' practices of compassion and love, justice and peace. It's to fulfill the ancient calling to a good and holy life which does not simply mean practicing the rituals of faith, but living each day in a way that reflects God's loving concern for all.

When we do that, Isaiah says that our light shall break forth like the dawn and healing shall spring up quickly.

So, what does all of this mean specifically for us? It means working in our clothing ministry or with our food truck, helping with the community garden or a Habitat House, serving in Honduras or Kenya. But it also means letting the person in front of us in traffic or the grocery store line, offering a warm smile to someone who looks distressed, being gracious with someone who is clearly agitated, caring for the loved one who is nothing but trouble without being codependent. And it means speaking up for those who have no voice, addressing the root causes of injustice, empowering people to seek their true potential.

In other words, it means doing whatever is required to love our neighbor, whether that neighbor is someone we know or a stranger, whether it is through some specific ministry or a simple act of kindness, whether it is a direct act of aid or an attempt to address systemic issues that lead to injustice. That's what it means to be salt and light.

I think of people in this church who have helped immigrants in many ways – through the clothing ministry, the Wyatts' work, providing transportation, a meal or friendship. I think of countless expressions of love for friends struggling with illness and grief – prayers, cards, calls, visits. I think of fundraising bike rides and walks, days spent advocating for some vulnerable group, benefit nights at restaurants and pubs, the conversation we experienced last night with the *Defamation* experience. This is what it means to be salt and light according to Isaiah and Jesus.

I also think of a story I have shared with you before about the day of Elizabeth Edwards' funeral at Edenton Street United Methodist Church. It was in December, 2010, the day of Toy Joy that year. So, it was going to be a crowded block as it was, but the added challenge was that the members of the Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka, Kansas came to protest. They were given space on the corner of Salisbury and Edenton Streets, right in front of our church sign. The counter-protest group, a much larger group (hundreds compared to less than a dozen Westboro Baptists) was given space across Edenton Street.

For those who may not know, the Westboro church is known for its inflammatory hate speak against a wide range of people including

Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox believers, LGBT people and U.S. soldiers and politicians. Whatever your leanings, these folks condemn them, and they show up at funerals of people they want to condemn and protest. The latter reality especially is mindboggling for people who claim the name Christian, and Baptist, we must admit. This is not what it means to be salt and light.

Anyway, an N&O reporter came to do a story on the Westboro protesters, but some of our folks steered her toward the leaders of Toy Joy, and she ended up writing a powerful story simply painting the picture of what was happening on that street – less that a dozen people claiming to be Christian screaming hateful things, a much larger diverse crowd denouncing their hatred, and then over a thousand children receiving Christmas gifts from hundreds of volunteers at our church. What was the story there? Was it about a few narrow-minded people screaming hateful things or so many more extending love and kindness?

The latter, it seems quite obvious, and this is a story we need to tell with our lives over and over again. Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth but we must retain our saltiness, our basic character as his people. He says that we are the light of the world, but we must not hide our light of love but let it shine so that others may see our good works and give glory to God. What is at stake in our witness, therefore, is not simply our faithfulness, but God's work in this world. Our manner of life, whether defined by hatred or love, points to the character of God. This is why it matters so much how we live, what kind of salt and light we are.

The story is told of an agnostic journalist whose minister friend tried to convert him when he was on his deathbed. The minister gave it his best, articulated the virtues of the Gospel, pleading with his friend to confess faith. When he finally came up for air, the friend said, "Are you talking about Christianity, life lived according to the teachings of Jesus? I'm all for it. When does it begin?" Gandhi affirmed the teachings of Christ. He said his trouble was with some of the people who claim to be Jesus' followers. Make no mistake - the kind of witness we give either

attracts people to faith or turns them away. What might the impact be if we were to be the kind of salt and light Jesus envisions?