

**“A Call to Boldness”**  
**Matthew 5:13–20**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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As most of you know, I have portrayed a number of characters from the Bible, church history, and my own imagination in an effort to explore sacred truth in a different way. At the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this sanctuary, I portrayed Dr. Thomas Skinner, who was pastor when the sanctuary was built and a key figure in making the case for a new sanctuary and funding it. I also portrayed the founding pastor of Ginter Park Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, Dr. William Hedley, who, like Dr. Skinner, was a fascinating character.

Dr. Hedley was from Yorkshire and the church took great pride in having a first pastor who hailed from England, though they only went sixteen miles north to Ashland, Virginia, to get him. He preached in morning attire with white coat and gloves. He had a pitcher of water placed next to a glass on a stand next to the pulpit. If he needed water while preaching, he would pause, take off his gloves, pour the water, put the gloves back on, and drink. As the son of an Englishman, I can say without hesitation or apology that he was a quintessential Englishman!

One of the most interesting things he did was to give an annual address, naming accomplishments and challenges of the church. When I did my research, I found these addresses in the church minutes, and the challenges he named were remarkably similar to those the church faced nearly 100 years later. So, I could speak to them in Dr. Hedley’s voice.

One challenge was that the church was one of the city’s best kept secrets because members were too bashful. They did great things, but who knew about them? Most in the neighborhood knew little more than that there was a church on the corner. So, Dr. Hedley called for boldness in word and deed, as I did through his voice.

Jesus too seems to be calling for boldness in the brief passage we have read today from Matthew 5, part of the Sermon on the Mount. “You are the salt of the earth,” he says, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be

restored?” “You are the light of the world,” he says, “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 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. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

The two sayings have a slightly different focus, but both call for boldness in faith, and both apply to individuals and the church. In the Greek, the “you” here is second person plural. We might say “y’all.” Y’all are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The message still applies to individuals. Thus, we say, “You are the light of the world!” to those who have been baptized. But it also applies to the church as a community of believers who are called to be salt and light.

The salt image speaks to the character of who we are and what we do, boldness in deed. Salt is a preservative and seasoning, and in both cases, freshness matters, it affects the capacity of salt to perform its function well. Jesus calls his followers to retain the essence of who we are so that we can function as we are called to function in the world.

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ ministry define what this means. It includes service to others, responding to human needs, working for peace, hungering for righteousness. And if we consider the latter part of our reading from Matthew, Jesus’ words about fulfilling the law and the prophets, our calling includes the fulfillment of Jewish teachings like those in our reading from Isaiah 58.

What is the fast God chooses? It is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our house, to clothe naked, and not hide from our own kin. That is what God desires, Isaiah says; that is what it means to retain our saltiness, Jesus says. Be who you are called to be, and be bold about it, they both proclaim!

The image of light speaks to how we allow others to learn not only who we are but Who has empowered us to be who we are, boldness in witness. The purpose of light is to point beyond itself. Jesus talks about letting our light shine so that others may see our good works and give glory — not to us but to God. Light points the way, it illumines the path. Our witness is to Christ. So, bold doesn’t necessarily mean loud. Our witness is not self-

focused. It's like the solar lights on our steps at home that enable our German Shepherds to walk down them safely at night. Our light allows others to see their way safely to God in a fearful world.

Jesus says his followers are salt and light. It is a call to boldness in word and deed, in ministry and witness.

So, what is the message for us? We have not lost our saltiness. We allow our light to shine. But are there ways we might become bolder in our ministry and witness as individuals and as a church? People know more about us than that we are a church on the corner. They know we have a clothing ministry and host a Weekday Preschool and Infant Toddler Center, but it is enough, especially in this time?

In many ways, this is what our Dream Team has been about. We are working to clarify our identity and purpose so that what we sense God calling us to be and do can inform the decisions we make about our educational building. You will hear more this week and at this month's church conference. But all this work inevitably involves being clearer about our identity and bolder in our ministry and witness.

In terms of ministry, we are pretty clear about our character or saltiness. We are a church that feels called to serve this community. So, we have an incredible clothing ministry that serves thousands each year, and this ministry leads to many other good things like Toy Joy and partnerships with StepUp, the Poe Center, and USCRI. We have a missions food truck and the fellowship fund which supports Housing All. We help house people through Family Promise and build houses through Habitat for Humanity. And our members serve the community in many ways. But is there more we might do and be?

That is a question that has permeated the Dream Team's work, and one answer that has risen to the surface repeatedly involves partnerships. There are many good people, churches, and organizations doing good things. What is missing is coordination, cooperation, and the exponential amplification of benefit that comes from people working together. Whether this means affordable housing, services for the court system, mental health resources, an expanded ITC, or some combination of these things, the boldest thing we

might do to fulfill our calling is to realize the value of partnerships and create space for them.

In terms of witness, there are also many ways we allow our light to shine, ways we tell others who we are and point to the Christ who has shaped us into a certain kind of community. Co-hosting with First Baptist Church on Wilmington Street the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. service for state employees is near the top of this list. Co-hosting with other downtown churches an annual Holiday Service of Hope and Remembrance offers a witness of compassion. And hosting First Night events expresses interest in the community, while inviting people into our space. But is there more we can do to allow our light to shine?

The art banner that will go up this week is a wonderful example. It is a bold, visual image of a church where people care for each other and the community around us in Christlike ways. And the willingness to invest in art, in and of itself, is bold, especially for a Baptist church.

Protestants in general and Baptists particularly have often practiced what someone has called a tyranny of the word. Words clearly matter but things like the nature of God, the mystery of the Gospel, and the hope of resurrection are all too large to be contained by words alone. Art expresses things words cannot, and some people respond more to visual images than words anyway.

The art banner is a bold affirmation of these realities, a critical means of connecting with people we might otherwise miss. In what other ways might we allow our light to shine? How might we become bolder in pointing to the Christ who has made of us a church?

The original “Star Trek” used the phrase “to boldly go where no man has gone before.” The updated version of the phrase is, “to boldly go where no one has gone before.” As the son of an English professor, I’d undo the split infinitive and say, “to go boldly where no one has gone before.” But it is a powerful phrase, one we’d like to embrace in our shared life. We don’t have to explore entirely new ground, go where no one has gone before. But we do want to be bold because we are called to be salt and light and to do so for the world’s sake and to the glory of God. That requires boldness!