

SALTY BELIEVERS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, December 9, 2018
based on Luke 14:34–35; Matthew 5:13–16***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Kingdom Is at Hand.” We have seen in past weeks that the Kingdom of God in Biblical teaching is “wherever God reigns.” So the kingdom of God is in heaven, the Kingdom of God in the future, and the Kingdom of God is a present reality whenever God’s rule takes hold in human life. Jesus said that “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15), because God has come among us in Jesus, making it possible for us to live as God’s people. All this means that the kingdom of God breaks into this world as people respond to Jesus in faith and join in commitment and service for God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered two simple but profound images for the way that believers can have an effect on the world, when he said, “You are the salt of the earth,” and “You are the light of the world.” We will consider today the message of that teaching for us. {prayer}

The philosopher Pliny the Elder, who wrote in the late first century A.D., once remarked that “nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine.”¹ In Latin, the words for salt and sunshine are “sal” and “sol,” so he got a clever word play there; but his saying illustrates how ancient people considered both salt and light to be essential. We can understand of course the importance of sunshine, but why was salt in those days considered to be something so crucial?

In ancient times, salt was first and foremost a preservative. In an age without refrigeration and in warm climates, meat would quickly go bad, unless it was rubbed with salt. Salt was seen as that which prevents rotteness. So when Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was saying that his followers are to prevent rotteness in the world. There was plenty of rotteness in the ancient world, but of course there is still plenty of rotteness today. This however does not mean that Christians have not done a good job at hindering rotteness; it only means that new rotteness continually appears in each new age. It is like what happens in your refrigerator—no matter how many times you clean it out, there are always new things that go bad, and you end up once again dragging some rotten thing out of the back corner. So there is always new rotteness that emerges in human history, meaning that Christians in every generation have plenty to do.

But in using the image of salt, Jesus is also saying something rather specific about how believers can have an effect on the world. Salt works by penetrating into things. It affects whatever it touches, yet as it does so it becomes invisible. This relates to a saying of Jesus that we considered last week, when Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs that can be observed.” (Luke 17:20) If Christians are to be salt, it means that we are to embed ourselves in the world in way that we are a thoroughgoing influence for good. We are to have a positive impact on all aspects of the society, not necessarily in ways that are flashy or obvious, but by being a force for honesty and integrity, by being at work with compassion and mercy, by counteracting evil and lifting up what is right. Salty believers would be people who continually touch everything with something of the grace and goodness of Christ.

The preservative aspect of salt would emphasize how our influence can prevent rotteness; but then there is another key aspect of salt—it enhances flavor. To be the salt of

the earth means therefore that we are not only at work to combat evil, but we are at work in positive ways to improve the world. This is something that Christians do in countless ways. In recent days more than 25 members of our church volunteered to be a part of our annual make a difference week. They went out to the homes of elderly members and others unable to do work on their property to rake leaves and do small projects around the house. This was invisible to all except the people to whose homes they arrived, but in every place they made a difference. This is exactly how believers often work and how God's Kingdom becomes expressed in the world.

Very often we tend to think that our smallness and relative insignificance in this world mean that we don't count for much. But when Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth, he lifts up the image of something that is quite small and unpretentious—ordinary salt—but which at the same time has a powerful and transformational effect. So Jesus is saying to each one of us that even though we may not look like anything extraordinary, we are the medium by which God can work in transformational ways in our world.

A message similar to the “salt of the earth” message is brought forth in Jesus' second image, when he says, “You are the light of the world.” The implication is that the world is in spiritual darkness, but we, as followers of Jesus, can bring light. Both the salt and the light images make plain that being a follower of Jesus means much more than having a private belief and piety. We are called to be an influence on the world—to project God's goodness into the society around us.

But then Jesus also offers a warning in connection with each image. Concerning salt he says, “But if salt has lost its savor [or its taste], how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything [not even the manure pile, as it is said in Luke] but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” [Matt. 5:13] You may wonder what Jesus is talking about. The chemists among us will note that salt, sodium chloride, is a very stable compound; it does not lose its saltiness. You can leave salt on your shelf for years, and it is still salt. But in ancient Palestine, the salt that ordinary people used was not like our salt. Our salt is refined; it is almost entirely sodium chloride, with trace elements added in such as iodine or material that keeps the salt from clumping. In ancient Palestine, people got their salt from the Dead Sea region. What they called salt was a cream-colored or yellowish powder that contained a relatively low percentage of sodium chloride, depending on where it was gathered, plus it had mineral salts of various kinds, plus many other impurities. Over time, the sodium chloride would leach out of this mix, either during storage if it got damp, or in the process of use. It is thought, for example, that one way people used this salt was to put it in a cloth bag and then swirl the bag in a cooking pot for a bit, causing some of the salt to leach into the pot, and leaving the impurities in the bag. Eventually, the powder, the “salt,” would “lose its saltiness.” At that point, they didn't want to throw it out in a field, and certainly not on the manure pile that was intended as fertilizer, since residual salts would ruin the soil for crops. So they would throw it on the road, where it was “trampled under foot”—exactly the image that Jesus used.

So the “salt” lost its saltiness when it got to the point that there were too many impurities in the bag relative to how much real salt was in the bag. Here is the key to applying this image to our lives. We lose our saltiness as Christians when there is too much stuff from the world around us—too many of the world's values and too many of the world's priorities and too many of the world's distractions—that get mixed into our lives, so that we lose our ability to make a Christian witness. This is a major concern that is often raised during the

Advent season. Do we let so much of the materialism and the busyness of the season take hold in us that we are no longer able to convey the real spirit of the gospel?

The second warning of Jesus has to do with the image of being the light of the world. He says that “no one puts a lamp under a bushel basket but on a stand, so that it gives light to all in the house.” (Matthew 5:15) The lamp in this case would have been an oil lamp. Archaeologists have found lots of these; they are typically quite small. Obviously it does no good if we keep our little light hidden. But even a small lamp will make a huge difference in an otherwise dark room as long as it is put out on a stand. So Jesus said, “Let your light shine.” (Matthew 5:16)

Jesus thus admonishes his followers not to neglect our fundamental calling to be salt and light for the world. But isn't all this finally a tall order? How are we, in all our imperfections and weaknesses, supposed to be the light of the world?

Here it is crucial to keep in mind the related saying of Jesus when he declared, “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12) The Scripture makes plain here that we are not the source of light for the world; but we can become the light of the world when we let the light of Christ shine through us. As our Children's Musical will put it, we become “carriers of the light”—the people who will reflect the light of Jesus to the whole world. Likewise we become the salt of the earth—a deep-reaching influence for good—when we let the spiritual influence of Christ work through us.

In the end, Jesus had a very high estimation of the impact that his followers would ultimately have on earth. He lifted up two elements considered crucial in the ancient world—salt and light—and said that we as his followers were to be that important for the well-being of humanity. Moreover, he did not simply say, “You ought to be the salt and light of the world.” He said, “You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.” This is incredible, especially considering the ragtag bunch to which Jesus was talking. But he was right. In the first century, and throughout the ages, the followers of Jesus have had an enormous impact for good. We are called to continue that story, to be salt and light, and so to let God's Kingdom come through us today.

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*.