

A Taste and a Glimpse

Matthew 5:13-20

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. 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 that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:13-20, NRSV)

As soon as Nancy Pelosi ripped up the pages of the State of the Union,
the Twitterazzi went to work.

Some were filled with delight, loving that open display of defiance
to a President’s troubling behavior and policies.

Others were filled with outrage.

It was disrespectful, they said,
a sign that those others are more interested in bringing down a President
than doing what’s best for the country.

No matter how you felt or thought about all that happened last Tuesday evening
and no matter what was said during the President’s speech,
I don’t think there’s anything that communicates
our country’s State of the Union better
than the refused handshake and the ripped up speech.

And the thing is, both of those actions did nothing more than demonstrate contempt for the other side.

In fact, that was their purpose --

to “rally the troops” in an election year by appealing to shared hostility and disgust.

It’s theater when you think about it --

in the round at the Capitol Building, The Polarized People’s Playhouse.

It would be truly humorous

if this drama didn’t have very real consequences.

We all get sucked into it – is there any way to avoid it?

In his book *The Church of Us vs. Them*, David Fitch includes a story

about an experiment conducted in 1954 by a social psychologist named Muzafer Sherif.¹
Sherif was thinking about group dynamics,
and he wanted to know why groups had such tension between them
and what could be done to reduce that tension.

To get at those questions,

Sherif invited twenty-two boys to a camp in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma.

All of the boys were eleven years old,
all came from similar socioeconomic and church backgrounds,
and all had similar grades in school.

He laid out the campground so that there would be two cabins,
each sleeping eleven boys and a counselor.

The cabins were far enough apart that
the boys could not see or hear the ones in the other cabin --
there was no social interaction between them at all.

By the end of the first week, each cabins came up with their own names, rules and rituals.

During the second week, the two cabins were allowed to do some things with each other,
and they quickly challenged each other to baseball games and other competitions.

Immediately, there were arguments between the boys of each cabin,
and, as time went on, things got worse.

They burned each other's flags.

They raided and vandalized each other's cabin.

Finally, they met for an all-out fistfight,
complete with sticks, bats, and socks filled with stones.

If the counselors hadn't stepped in, there would have been injuries.²

The researchers then tried to see if he could bring the two sides together.

But even though they had them eat meals and watch movies together,
the two cabins continued to argue and refused to associate with each other.

Finally, the researchers created a series of crises that forced the two cabins to work together.

Each time that they faced a crisis and worked toward a common goal, they grew closer.

Eventually, their hostility for each other was overcome,
and the boys formed friendships with those in the other cabin.³

In the years since that experiment,
people have reached different conclusions about what it teaches.

Some say that tribalism is an inherent fact of life.

Others say that hostility toward another group can only be overcome by a good crisis.

And still others say that groups will only come together if they have a common enemy,
whether it's other people or a particularly difficult situation.⁴

The thing is, we don't need that experiment to reflect on these things.

We need only observe the state of our country.

¹ David Fitch, *The Church of Us vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith that Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press).

² Ibid., 165-67.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

And, sadly, we need only observe the state of our churches.
At this place and time, I think the way that Christians have become most like non-Christians
is not in their stance on any particular issue.
It's in their inability to resist the temptation to enemize those who disagree with them.

I made that word up, enemize, and I'm quite proud of it.
Enemize: verb; two definitions, according to me:
(a) to make an enemy of someone; or
(b) to give an enema to someone.

When I say that we want to enemize those who disagree with us,
I'm using both definitions:
We either want to defeat them as our enemy,
or we want to cleanse them of their impurities

You are *the* salt of the earth, Jesus said.
You are *the* light of the world.
That's what Jesus called his disciples.
The Salt. The Light.

I intentionally emphasized "the" here
because, according to Matthew, Jesus emphasized it.
In Greek, the definite article only is used to call attention to the particularity of something.
And so, Matthew is telling us,
Jesus isn't calling his disciples just any old salt among other kinds of salt in the world.
Jesus is not saying, Disciples, you are Morton's salt of the earth.
No, he said, you are *the* salt of the earth.
And Jesus didn't call his disciples just one source of light among other sources.
No, the disciples are *the* light of the world.
The disciples are the real deal; they're the definite article.
Because they are with Jesus, they are *the* Salt, *the* Light.

These verses come right at the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus' teachings about how God's people are to live --
turning the other cheek, loving enemies, truth-telling, and so on.
We Mennonites love the Sermon on the Mount,
probably pointing to this section of the Bible more than any other.
But I think we sometimes forget that
before Jesus gives any instructions about how his followers should live,
he tells them who they are.
First, they will be blessed by God,
even when they are persecuted,
even when they are reviled.
And, second, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.
The message of the gospel is not be all you can be.
It's become who you already are,
who God created you to be.
You, plural,
meaning we,

me and you together.

The question is, of course,
what does this even mean?

What does it mean to be salt
when more and more people are on a sodium-free diet when it comes to the church?

What does it mean to be light,
when there's so many lights shining that it's hard to see the night sky?

What does it mean to be agents of reconciliation,
when the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the marginalized
are being targeted or exploited for political gain?

And how is it possible to be any of these things
without getting caught up in the hostility and ideological antagonisms
that seem to be driving everyone and everything around us?

And, maybe, there's one more question we need to be asking.
Why is it that people so often see the church
as reflecting that same hostility and those same antagonisms?

You can we be sure that you are operating under an ideology that fuels the prevailing antagonisms
if you primarily define ourselves not by who you are,
but by who you stand against;
if you feel better about yourself when your opponent fails;
if you can never bring yourself to admit that the ones on the other side;
might have a point about something, anything.
if you spend so much time and energy organizing and rallying against something or someone
that you have no time or energy for living and growing in the life that Jesus frees us to live

Do you recognize any of these behaviors in yourself?
I do. (To be clear, I'm talking about me here. You can answer that question for yourself.)
Do you recognize any of these behaviors in the church.
I do.

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus said.
But if the salt has lost its taste,
how can its saltiness be restored?
You are the light of the world, Jesus said.
But if a light is hidden under a bushel basket,
how can it be seen?

For us, salt is mainly used to season foods or maybe to melt ice in the winter.
Salt is added to food not to overpower it, but to preserve it or even to bring out its true flavor.
Unless you're livestock, no one simple consumes salt.
It's very existence is for something else.

For Israel, salt also had another use.
Salt was essential in temple rituals as a part of covenants.

In Exodus chapter 30, God told Moses that salt was to be used in the preparation of incense that was put before the covenant.

It was to be regarded as pure and holy to the Lord.

Leviticus chapter 2 gives specific instructions to priests in preparing grain sacrifices:

“You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of your covenant with your God.”

And so, when Jesus called his disciples the salt for the earth,
he was referring to them as the signs of God’s covenant.
Jesus tells his disciples that they are people of a different flavor,
but their very purpose, their reason for being,
is not for themselves but for the earth, the world.

Similar to salt, light is only recognized in its relationship to something else,
namely darkness, or, if you want to get technical, less brightness.

In fact, darkness and light would not even be known to us but for their relationship with the other.

Throughout the Old Testament, light was used to symbolize the presence of God.

God is identified as the source of light,

and God’s presence is referred to in Isaiah as a “bright shining light”.

Israel is referred to as the light to the nations.

When Jesus called his disciples the light of the world.

he was saying that his followers will be the signs of God’s own presence,
the city on a hill that cannot be hidden

I find it interesting that just after Jesus called his disciples
the salt of the earth and the light of the world,
he turned their attention to the scriptures, to the law.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets,” Jesus said,
“I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

To fulfill them. To fill them to their fullest.

Jesus did not come to set the Hebrew scriptures aside.

He did not come to make them unnecessary, or less important.

Jesus did not even come to replace them with . . . a new testament.

In fact, I think Jesus would have a problem
that his followers took the very Bible that he loved and labeled it “Old”.

After all, what we call the “Old Testament”

is the Bible that Jesus read and memorized and interpreted and obeyed.

Jesus would never have envisioned that blank page between the Old Testament and the New,
between his teachings and his Bible.

In fact, if there is one page that is safe to rip out of our Bibles, I think that might be the one.

Jesus leads his disciples into the scriptures, not away from them.

Jesus frees us to see ourselves, others, and our world,

in the story that is told in the Scriptures,

the story of God working in and through a people

to reconcile all people, all of Creation through Jesus Christ.

This is The Story that swallows up the ideologies that fuel our antagonisms
the hostilities that divide us from each other.

Through the Spirit, we have been empowered to live this Story,
to see this Story at work,
and to remain confident that this is The Story that will eventually engulf
all the other stories that cause us to hate and fear our enemies.

When we see the Scriptures in this way, when we read and interpret them together,
we will not grasp them as a shield to defend ourselves and our place,
we will not wield them as a weapon to coerce others to abandon their positions, and
we will not hide behind them as a wall to exclude others from our presence.

Instead, in every situation we encounter, in our pains, our hurts, our conflicts, our questions,
we will turn to the scriptures together, asking,
I wonder what this means in relation to The Story that God is telling us in Jesus?

You know, as followers of Jesus,
we are called to work for justice and to oppose discriminatory and racist policies.
The church has a place in the public square,
and we as a church would be abandoning our mission if we stayed silent.

But we do it in the name of Christ.
And we do it without setting out to make enemies.
Surely, we will have them,
but our intent is to be agents of reconciliation in the name of Christ.
And we learn this by participating in the Great Story of God that is told in the scriptures.

You are salt for the earth.
You are the light of the world.
You are a taste and a glimpse of the reign of God.
In the Name of Jesus,
may we become who we are.

Para todos que son amados por Dios y llamados para ser santos,
there is grace and peace for you through God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
To all who are loved by God and called to be saints,
hay gracia y paz para ustedes a través de Dios nuestro padre y del Señor Jesucristo.