

Epiphany 5 A Sermon
Matthew 5:13-16
February 5, 2023

“On Being Salt and Light”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

‘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 hidden. 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 God in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 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.’

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Many of you are aware that before living in Wisconsin, I spent 10 years in Minnesota. Do we have any out and proud Minnesotans with us today? Generally speaking, Minnesotans are proud of Minnesota – after all, they came up with Target, Best Buy, the pacemaker, 3M, and the infamous “hot dish.” They have a uniquely colorful vocabulary, including words and phrases like *uff dah*, *ish*, and *o fer cute* (I actually heard someone say that!). Perhaps the most striking thing I learned about Minnesotans is that

they have the blandest food palette in the world! I was once at a church event – I think it was bingo – and I was in charge of refreshments. Before the event I ran to the Dollar General across the street to grab the treats and, among other things, I selected a bag of generic Doritos. During bingo, an older woman picked up a chip, looked it over carefully, actually smelled it, then nibbled at a corner. A broad smile spread across her face and she exclaimed, “Oh, that’s spicy!” A Dorito!

Perhaps it’s a little strange to hear Jesus make references to seasonings in our reading from Matthew’s gospel and the famous Sermon on the Mount. “You are the salt of the earth,” he proclaims to his hearers. I don’t know what sorts of seasonings were available in 1st century Palestine, but in the increasingly globalized market place of the 21st century, I think he would have said, “You are the spice of the earth!” We’re the flavor. We’re spicy. Jesus also tells his hearers that they are the light of the world. Salt, spice, and light. That’s who Jesus says we are.

I wonder, how many people look at what happens at most churches and exclaim with a broad smile, “Oh, that’s spicy!” I wonder, how many people look at what happens at most churches and honestly say, “Those church folks, they’re full of bright ideas. They shine. They make the community and the world a brighter place!” If anything, the American church of the 21st century has a reputation for being bland, flavorless, and dim – stumbling through life by a light that began to fade no less than 65 years ago or charging recklessly forward by the false light of ego, exceptionalism, and extremism. But that’s not who Jesus says we are. We’re salt. We’re light. Or at least that’s what he says we’re supposed to be.

In so many ways, the Sermon on the Mount, from which this morning’s reading comes, is an aspirational text. Comprising chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s gospel, the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes of last week, and contains much of Jesus’ ethical teaching, the Lord’s Prayer, the Golden Rule. It’s a recipe for living the way of Jesus. The degree to which his followers actually live the Sermon on the Mount is

another matter, but there's little question that it's had a profound impact on leaders and thinkers alike, from authors like Tolstoy, Vonnegut, and Bonhoeffer to activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

In an address delivered to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Colombo, Ceylon, in 1927, Gandhi said this:

The message of Jesus, as I understand it, is contained in his sermon on the mount unadulterated and taken as a whole . . . If then I had to face only the sermon on the mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, "oh yes, I am a Christian" . . . But negatively I can tell you that, in my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount . . . And hence I say that we do not need to proselytize through our speech or writing. We can only do it really with our lives. Let them be open books for all to study.¹

Gandhi hits the nail on the head. The Sermon on the Mount is the guidebook for living like Jesus – for all to see – no proselytization, no evangelism needed. The problem has been, and still is, that Christians are better at talking about Jesus than living like him. Perhaps that's why the same Gandhi famously said that, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

In so many ways, the Sermon on the Mount is an aspirational text, challenging us to bless and be a blessing; to be a light and guide for the world; to season the world around us like salt – to be spicy! But it's not just aspirational. Jesus says: "You ARE the salt of the earth . . . You ARE the light of the world." He doesn't qualify that – no ifs, ands, or buts. Just a statement of fact. Some days, I don't shine very brightly and I'm certainly not spicy. This is a welcome word of hope and affirmation. The only command Jesus issues here is that we let our light shine before others

¹ Robert Ellsberg, Editor. *Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi on Christianity*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021.

– but even when we don't, we're still the light. He's simply telling us to be who we already are. There are days when I need that reminder.

I wonder, what would it be like if we at New England Church really lived into this part of our identity – being salt and spice and light. Jesus says that we're already those things. What could happen if we believed him – if we took that knowledge deep into ourselves and lived out of it for all to see?

Author Kurt Vonnegut once said that, “If it weren't for the message of mercy and pity in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I would just as soon be a rattlesnake.” While humorous, Vonnegut's statement strikes right to the core of the matter: being human, being Christian, is about being what we already are – salt, and spice, and light – for all to see.

May it be so with us. Amen.