

Matthew 5:13–16 (NRSV)

“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.

Salt of the Earth; Light on a Hill

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

This morning Jesus gives us two images: salt and a lamp. They come right out of everyday life. We know from the Old Testament that salt was so important in ancient times that important agreements were called salt covenants. Aristotle tells of an old proverb in the ancient Mediterranean world: You do not really know a person until you have eaten salt together. Just as important were lamps. Early on the Israelites learned that olive oil could be lit and provide light in the darkness. To paraphrase Psalm 139 the night became as day. An overstatement, but not by much. Scribes, cooks, artisans could work when and where it was impossible before.

This morning we are early in Jesus' ministry. After his time in the desert with John, he returned to the Galilee, where he came from, his childhood stomping grounds, and he began to gather disciples and crowds of listeners, and he taught them. This is where we are. Right at the beginning of this teaching. On the steep slopes at the edge of the Sea of Galilee.

It says Jesus went up the mountain, but the mountains of the Galilee aren't like the Alps or the Rockies. They're more worn and rolling [slide 1]. But that shouldn't fool you. As you can see, the slopes are arduous. He went up the mountain. Now, the mountainous slopes and valleys along the shore create hollows, natural amphitheatres. [slide 2] A speaker at height can be heard by a surprisingly large number of people in the hollow. It was in a place like this, maybe even this place, where Jesus addressed the crowds and gave them the Sermon on the Mount.

"You are the salt of the earth," he said. Immediately they would have understood the allusion. [slide 3] They would have thought of its natural occurrence not too far from them, down at the Salt Sea, or the Dead Sea. Salt, life-enhancing crystals all over the ground. Salt of the earth. Flavoring, preservative, cleanser. "You are the salt of the earth." [slide 4] As a side note, with formations like this it becomes a little easier to imagine Lot's wife as a pillar of salt, doesn't it?

Quickly, though, Jesus shifted gears and brought them back to the shores of the Galilee. [slide 5]. Standing near the top of the amphitheater he continued, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." And as he said this, he would have pointed across the water to the east side. And they would have known immediately what he was talking about. [slide 6]. This. Hippos. Do you see what I mean? Is this better? [slide 7] A city on a hill? Well, it's a hill alright. But, so what? Well, it's more than a hill. In Jesus' day it would have been a city on a hill. [slide 8] And not just any city, either. It was one of the ten cities of the Roman Decapolis. One of the Ten Roman cities on the empire's eastern frontier.

And there was no mistaking the meaning of that, the purpose of this city on a hill. [slide 9] Towering 1150' above the shore, its presence made a statement, just as it was intended to. Power. Surveillance. Omnipresence. Rome rules, it said. [slide 10] Even today, its Roman roadways remain monuments to the formidability and durability. [slide 11] From anywhere in the vicinity the city would have been visible. [slide 12] Its mammoth towers would have gleamed in the sunlight. And at night its lamps would have flickered from the hill and twinkled their reflections in the water below like starlight.

This city on a hill was a decidedly non-Jewish city, too. Remember the story of the demoniac possessed by a legion of spirits? If you remember, Jesus cast the spirits out of the demoniac, [slide 13] and the spirits entered a herd of pigs, and the pigs rushed off the precipice and into the abyss and then into the sea. It is very likely that Hippos, this city on a hill, is that city.

As intended, it was a city on a hill for all to see. A city in their face displaying Roman power and opulence. And to add insult to injury, a city in their midst, filled with swine. They would have gotten the point. We will put pollution on your overlooks and let it run in your midst. A city built on a hill cannot be hid, is not meant to be hid, is meant to intimidate and demean. On that day, Jesus was pointing over their backs across the Sea of Galilee at that city. [background slide]

One imagines Jesus' listeners found his tangible metaphors to be arresting. The salt crystals of the Dead Sea, oil lamps and the towering, tainted city of Hippos were all in their daily experience. The metaphors hit home with their familiarity. They were right with him. But then there must have followed a moment when, as familiar as the images were, that they were befuddled by what Jesus meant. What had salt and light and a city on a hill to do with them? You are the salt of the earth; don't lose your saltiness. You are a lamp; don't hide your light under a basket; instead be like Hippos, the city over there, on a hill that no one can miss.

Many readers of the Bible in the years afterwards puzzled over what Jesus was thinking. Did Jesus say they were salt because salt is so valuable, or useful? A few commentators, whom I'm guessing haven't done much gardening, have suggested that being the salt of the earth is like being fertilizer. It's a nice idea. The disciples were supposed to be like salt spread over the soil to make the earth fertile. But, of course, any farmer knows that if you spread salt on the soil, it will kill almost everything. I don't think Jesus thought the disciples were fertilizer. Well, what about the lamp? The lamp has been as puzzling, too. Oil light was important, they knew. But what does it mean that we're supposed to shine, be like a city on hill for all to see? Does Jesus mean that the disciples are supposed to be missionaries, as persistently present as the city of Hippos? Certainly Jesus doesn't mean the disciples should lord intimidation and pollution over their neighbors.

In the end, all of this speculation about the hidden meaning of saltiness and light and the city of Hippos is probably making things more complicated than they really are. Jesus seems to be talking about the idea that some things have a special, an inherent purpose. Salt's purpose is to season things. If salt loses its saltiness, whatever that means, it no longer can do what it exists to do. And a lamp's purpose is to illuminate. If a lamp is hidden or covered up or extinguished, it can no longer fulfill its purpose, its reason for existence.

That's what Jesus is after. He's not especially interested in salt, or lamps, and certainly not the city of Hippos. He's interested in them as common things that he can point to that all have definite purposes, reasons for existence. And absent those purposes, none of them would even exist in a way. Salt without saltiness isn't salt. A lamp without visible flame is not a light. And Hippos without its looming Roman structures would be but another hilltop at the edge of the Sea of Galilee.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is building disciples. He is calling and instructing his followers. And he is very clear that this discipleship, this following after him, has a purpose and that that purpose is integral, even identical, to what they do. The purpose of a disciple is discipleship. You are disciples, but a disciple who loses the essence, the saltiness her discipleship

is no longer a disciple. You are disciples, but a disciple who extinguishes his lamp of discipleship is no longer a disciple.

This can sound like doubletalk, I'm sure. Some sort of nonsensical language game. But Jesus is honing in on a crucial point. Discipleship, the purpose of discipleship, to be a disciple of Jesus, is to bring, or be a part in bringing the kingdom of God into existence. But here's the thing, what brings the kingdom of God into existence is being the kingdom of God. It's salt being salty. It's light being light. Let me try to make this clearer. A farmer tills the ground to produce a crop to feed his family and others. But the act of farming isn't the same thing as the crop. Farming is important and necessary. Jesus himself tells lots of stories in which the farmers serve as examples. But a farmer isn't the food he raises. Farming is a means to get the food. And that's where discipleship is different. Being a disciple is being the kingdom of God. In discipleship what you are, what you do and what you accomplish are all one and the same. Love your neighbor, and love your enemy is not just a means to the kingdom of God; it is the kingdom of God. Your treasure is where your heart is also, says Jesus. A good heart treasures fairness towards others and rightness with God, and that is not just a means to the kingdom of God; it is the kingdom of God. A true neighbor, like the Good Samaritan, helps the stranger beaten and bloodied in the ditch. That's not the means to the kingdom of God; it is the kingdom of God.

Jesus is making an important point here. In discipleship, in the kingdom of God, there is no distinction between ends and means. Think of how far we get off track when we think of it otherwise. If ends and means are disconnected, you can mount Crusades and slaughter the infidel to restore the kingdom of God. If the ends justify the means, even God can hate for a good cause, which allows Fred Phelps to say that God hates fags as Phelps' way to bring about the kingdom of God. If the ends justify the means, ethnic cleansing is an acceptable means to the kingdom of God.

With very simple and familiar metaphors Jesus pulls the rug from under such thinking. Ends and means are the same, he says. There's no saltiness if the salt loses its saltiness. There's no light if the lamp covers or extinguishes its flame. There's no discipleship if disciples forswear their discipleship. There's no kingdom of God unless its occupants act like the kingdom of God. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are the kingdom of God. Amen.