

Thomas Jefferson was an enigma. He believed that the Bible needed to be fixed, so he took his scissors and cut out the parts of the Bible that he couldn't believe. He removed the Virgin birth, all the Miracles, and the Resurrection and he cobbled together a book that he titled “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth.” Practical man, that Jefferson, maybe a little too practical—not to mention arrogant. What he did was to remove from the Bible all the things that really challenge the human mind and reason. I believe that Jesus was practical. At least he was practical enough to say, “*You are the salt of the earth*” and “*You are the light of the world.*” And he was practical enough to show us that moral perfection is realistically beyond our grasp. Isn't that why he came?

Last Sunday I said something like the Beatitudes are *not really practical*. Some would say they are *impossible*. After the Beatitudes Jesus says, “*You are salt*” and “*You are light.*” No one lighting a lamp, hides it. Admit it, you're tempted to sing that song, aren't you? “*Hide it under a bushel, NO! I'm gonna let it shine.*” Or if you aren't, maybe you should be. Let it shine! That's what Jesus says. Not *make it* shine. But *let it* shine.

When we want to stress someone's solid worth and usefulness, we often say: “People like that are the salt of the earth.” In the ancient world, salt was highly valued. The Greeks called salt “divine.” In a phrase, which in Latin is a kind of jingle, the Romans said: ‘There is nothing more useful than sun and salt.’ In the time of Jesus, salt was connected in people's minds with three special qualities:

1) Salt was connected with *purity*. No doubt its glistening white color made the connection easy. The Romans said that salt was the purest of all things, because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. Salt was indeed the most primitive of all offerings to the gods, and to the end of the day the Jewish sacrifices were offered with salt. So, if Christians are to be the salt of the earth, they must be examples of *purity*.

2) In the ancient world, salt was the commonest of all *preservatives*. In this sense Jesus was saying, “Christians must be the cleansing antiseptic in any society in which they happen to be. They must be the ones who by their presence defeat corruption and make it easier for others to be and do good.”

3) But the greatest and the most obvious quality of salt is that salt enhances the *flavor* of things. As William Barclay once said, “Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Christianity lends flavor to life.” (Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume One*, New Daily Study Bible: p. 137. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition)

We just walked through the Beatitudes last Sunday. We were reminded, though we often try to turn them into *imperatives*—get out there and be peacemakers, be meek, be hungry and thirsty for righteousness—that Jesus doesn’t present them that way. He presents them as *indicatives*. He is describing, not commanding. Likewise in these verses that follow the first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn’t say, “Get salty!” He doesn’t say “Light up!” He says, almost as a matter of fact, “*You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.*” If you’re like me, you can’t help but wonder, “When did that happen?” When did I become salt for the earth? When did I become light for the world? I’m just me. Just doing my best. Just watching out for me and the people I love. Just trying not to get trampled underfoot. Now Jesus wants me to shine, to give light to the whole house.

You see, that’s the thing about light; it doesn’t exist for its own sake. It isn’t about getting folks to look at the light. When we try to become the focus of attention, when we take center stage, we aren’t being the light. The light is there to help folks find their way. It’s about shining on the path, about revealing the hazards along the way, about getting where we need to be with a minimum of roadblocks or detours.

And salt, salt on its own, for its own sake, is not really a good thing. But as a flavor enhancer, as a preservative, and as a purifier, it is invaluable. In Jesus’

day, it was a common practice for farmers to salt their fields to add the right mix of minerals to help crops to grow. The word that we translate as *earth* means literally “ground, or dirt.” *You are the salt of the ground, the salt of the dirt.* Not a fun job, perhaps, but one that helps things grow. That’s our job. Not to be the center of attention, but that which helps things grow.

Of course, it’s risky. No question about it. It’s a loud and noisy world out there, and we might be safer just keeping our heads down. But we can’t. Jesus tells us “*A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.*” Even though it doesn’t fit as well, he throws that in as a reminder that we are all exposed. We are the representatives of the faith whether we want to be or not. So, we might as well be good ones. We are the manifestation of Christ in the world today, whether we claim it or not. So, why not claim it? Why not live as though Christ is alive in us?

That is what he is saying: “You are the salt of the earth, why not help things grow? You are the light of the world, why not help folks find their way? Why not mentor, why not lead, why not be what you are, a sign of Christ’s presence in the world today?” “Get out there,” Jesus says, out there in the world, the noisy, wonderful, scary, glorious world and let your light shine. Don’t worry about being trampled underfoot; that only happens when you stop being who you are called and created to be. You are light. Let it shine.

Jesus asks us to recognize the power we already have. “You are salt. You are light,” *not* “Do you want to be salt? Do you want to be light?” You already are! So, given that declaration from our Lord, how will we season life? What will we light up? Once again, Jesus lays an expectation and blessing on us as we are called to follow him. He implies in the Sermon on the Mount that we don’t really have a choice in the matter. I don’t mean we are forced into something against our will. What I mean, and what I think he meant, is that we are the representatives of the Christian church whether we consciously try to claim that role or not. Family, friends, neighbors, and strangers will look at us and think, “Oh, so that is what it means to be a part of the Christian faith” or “That is what belonging to a church means in terms of how we live in the world.”

Given this truth, let us live humbly. That seems the only appropriate response. Let us live with grace and hospitality and kindness. Of course, we have opinions about how the world ought to be, but how we express those opinions matters just as much. So, let's celebrate saltiness wherever we see it. Let's find the ones who are mentoring, the ones who are supporting and guiding. Let's begin with our parents, our teachers, and then in the church go further to our youth leaders, our confirmation mentors, our ministry teams, our deacons and our elders, and our church staff. They are all around us.

In an anxiety-ridden world, Christians should be the people who remain grounded. In a depressed world, Christians should be the people who remain full of the joy of life. These are some ways we can live a practical life, a way of life that we have seen in "The Practical Jesus." But we cannot do it alone.

God's standard for living is the Torah, rules, and traditions, that can make keeping the Law a somewhat confusing exercise for the mind and a burden for the conscience. But Jesus says Scripture will not pass away without being fulfilled. How can that possibly be? And Jesus says that we will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless our righteousness surpasses that of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. When taken in isolation, we might foolishly think Jesus is preaching a works righteousness. But what he is actually doing is completing and filling in the imagery of salt and light.

Unless we are what we are, people *in* his kingdom, then we are not actually people *of* his kingdom. Sounds like circular reasoning, I know, but we can only be what we are—and that is salt and light. Just as the Messiah, through whom the world was made, is the only one who can fulfill all that God has for the world, verse 17 reveals to us all that we need to know. Jesus says: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" In the ways that Jesus lived, taught, healed, preached, and loved, we see the light that shines for the whole world. We taste how he has flavored all the earth. He does so in ways that are completely out of sync with the ways of the world, yet he's calling us to do the same. Amen.