

Small Salt, Little Light

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Matthew 5:13-16 — “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” and “light of the world.” Those words, those two metaphors, sound pretty grand to me. Do they seem a bit overambitious to you? Aren’t they claiming a little too much for us Christians? These days, at least, many of us don’t feel quite so big and important. Our place in the world used to seem much larger. Our light — the light of churches in this country — seemed far more prominent in times past. Of course, if we went back in time 50 years, we’d see that people were saying the same thing back then. It’s how Christians have spoken for much of history. “The good ol’ days” of our faith are almost always behind us. The religious grass was always greener a couple of generations ago. Nevertheless, some will say that the fields of our faith now are surely drier than they have been in a long time. Surely, with so many people not going to church, and young people especially finding their spiritual needs met elsewhere, the religious landscape around us can look pretty barren. Are we still the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Perhaps we should start thinking of ourselves in more modest terms. Rather than being “the salt of the earth,” perhaps we just give a dash of salt to our community. Our church, and each church, just provides a bit of flavor for the surrounding area and helps to preserve its traditions. As for Christianity at large... Well, it’s still a valuable spice in the mix of society, but if we’re honest with ourselves, we know that it’s not the most exciting thing on the market. Plenty of people could more or less do without it, and really, too much of it can be bad for your health. Perhaps, then, we would do well to start thinking of ourselves as being more like the salt shaker and the light bulb on your bulletin: those are more modest metaphors, perhaps more accurate, and then there’s less pressure to live up to a glorified past.

But here’s what’s so interesting to me about this passage in Matthew’s Gospel: when Jesus called his followers “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” at the time, those followers amounted to not many more people than you all sitting here today. At the time, they were not the religious majority in their area; they were not a social force to be reckoned with; they had virtually no political clout. Far from the respectable in-crowd, they were ragtag and rebellious. And yet, in their seemingly insignificant state, Jesus says to them, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”

So, what that tells me is that Jesus' isn't talking here about being big, powerful, or prestigious. We — both the big “we” of American churches and the small “we” of this congregation — we can be the salt and light that God wants us to be even when we are relatively small and marginal. Friends, I honestly believe that the church's size and status in our country today is a blessing. I believe that God has distinct gifts and distinct purposes for us in this time, when we feel like just a small amount of salt and just a little bit of light.

A year or so ago, the church through which I'm getting ordained, up in New York City, began a ministry for homeless youth who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer. There's a spot on the Hudson River, not too far from the church, where a lot of these homeless teenagers gather during the day. Many of them were kicked out of their homes halfway across the country, and now they're here, and they really don't have anywhere else to go. Our church's basement has a handful of showers, which don't get used very often, so the church leadership decided that we could arrange for these teenagers to use our showers a couple of times a week. On the first day of this new ministry, our associate pastor — who happens to be gay — led a large group of homeless teenagers from that spot on the river to our church, so that they could clean themselves up for the first time in a while. Some of the teenagers were sheepish, others were ecstatic, all of them were grateful for the rare opportunity to do what most of us do everyday — at least what most of us *should* do everyday. At the end of the line was one kid. He got to the door leading into the church, and he didn't go in. He *couldn't* go in. He knew that there were no strings attached to the shower, he knew that this church was fully welcoming and affirming of people like him, he knew that the pastor who had brought them over here was gay himself, he knew that everyone else was getting clean and warm and refreshed, but *still* this homeless gay teenager could not bring himself to walk through the doors of a church — so badly had other churches wounded him, so painful were the scars that they left on his mind and heart.

Friends, what if God doesn't want churches in this country to focus so much on drawing the crowds? What if God isn't as desperate as we are to pack the pews or to wield influence in our communities or to be taken seriously in the halls of power? What if what God wants most from us right now is to find kids like that, and adults like that, people who have been beaten down and cast out by the world, and by the church, and say to them, with gentle, patient, Christ-like compassion, “It's okay. You're welcome here. Come whenever you're ready. We'll be here for you.” Friends, what if we are called — what if *you* are called — to be the love of God for just a few of those people? What if that's what it means for us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world today?

Mother Teresa once said that “not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.” Today, we partake of this bread and this cup. It's a small thing that points to the great love of Christ for all people. As we share in this holy practice together, may our souls be re-energized to love greatly. Amen.