

Sermon: A Foretaste and a Vision
Text: Matthew 5:13-20
Date: February 5, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.

Matthew 5:13a, 14a

Of all the special service that we do here -- Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, even Back Porch Sessions -- our Christmas Eve candlelight service of lessons and carols may be my favorite.

It concludes with what is without a doubt my favorite moment from any of these services. If you've been here on Christmas Eve, then you know that we close the service by making a circle of light around the sanctuary.

We do this using the same flow we'll use later today to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

We invite members of the congregation to come forward and light a candle of their own from the candles that Beth and I are holding. But instead of returning to our seats we form a ring of light that runs all the way around the sanctuary.

But that's not all. We make this circle of light while singing *Silent Night*. As you might imagine, it's beautiful moment. But it's not just beautiful, it's holy.

It's also extremely special for me. Because as each person comes forward and lights their candle from mine, I think to myself, and sometimes I interrupt my singing to say this: *Ray, you are the light of the world. Sandy, you are the light of the world. John, Kristin, Allee, Evan, Gretchen, you are the light of the world.*

At best, calling members of my congregation the light of the world would be presumptuous, if this claim came from me. At worst, the statement might strike the average listener as wildly grandiose.

The good news is the idea is not mine. It comes from our boss, our Commander in Chief, if you will. *You are the salt of the earth*, Jesus says to his disciples. *You are the light of the world*.

You have to admit: it is an extraordinary claim, particularly in light of the unique properties of salt and light. We'll come back to those in a moment.

Maybe the most extraordinary part of this unlikely status is that we don't have to do anything to achieve it. We don't have to earn the right to be salt. We don't have to generate or spend any energy to be light.

In Jesus's way of seeing the world, that is just who we are. It's not in our nature. It is our nature.

And you think, *What, little ol' me, the salt of the earth? The light of the world?*

Yes, little ol' you. And little ol' me. And little ol' all of us together.

But how can this be? What does that even mean, you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. It sounds so . . . fancy.

Well, I think we might find the answer to that question in the condition the world was in when Jesus spoke these words.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus makes this claim at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, his first and by far his most famous sermon.

The words immediately follow the Beatitudes. *Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the peacemakers. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.*

Prior to this moment there simply was no precedent for a community that understood itself this way. Not in Judea, not anywhere. It's clear that in preaching this sermon and making these claims, Jesus intended to originate something completely new.

To borrow from the great preacher and commentator, Tom Long, he is establishing a colony of heaven, an outpost, really, set down in alien culture--a foretaste of what was to come, a vision of God's in-breaking realm.

As Long puts it, in a violent world, “the members of this community are peacemakers. In a world filled with sorrow, they mourn for the homeless, for the lost, for the refugee, for the brokenhearted” (*Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, pg. 51).

It was exactly the kind of colony the world desperately needed then. And in case you’ve not been reading the news lately, it’s exactly the kind of colony the world needs now.

But an obvious question follows. Given the scale of what’s happening in the wider world at present, what difference could this small colony make? What is the point of an alternative community if the dominant culture is so . . . dominant?

The question reminds me of a lyric Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote for his recent smash hit musical. In a moment of brutal candor General George Washington admits to his trusted aide, Alexander Hamilton, after whom the musical is named: *We’re out gunned, out manned, out numbered and out planned.*

I’m pretty sure Jesus was aware the same was true for him and his followers. Relative to their Roman overlords: they were indeed out gunned, out maned, out numbered and out planned.

Which may give us our answer as to why he says what he does. You are the salt of the earth, he says, not the soil. You are the light of the world, not the air.

And that brings us back to the inherent properties of salt and light. Let’s say you’ve just made a large pot of soup. You started with two quarts of water, and added a whole bunch of fresh, succulent vegetables.

You have every reason to believe it’s going to be absolutely delicious. But when you take that first taste, you’re disappointed to discover that it’s missing something. The soup is actually kind of bland.

How much salt does it take to bring this big batch water and vegetables to life? To add vibrancy to the pot? To make that soup sing, as it were? This much? (Shows a carton of salt.) This much? (Shows a salt shaker.) No. It really only takes a pinch, just the amount you can grab between two fingers and your thumb.

Or maybe more in keeping with how things feel out in the world right now, let's suppose that after reading the news, you go out for a hike. You're not a hiker, really, but you just need to get out into nature to clear your head.

Let's suppose you get lost. Because you're inexperienced, let's suppose you brought no light and no matches. Now let's suppose it's February. Darkness falls. You have no idea where you are, or how to get home.

It was 45 degrees under bright sunny skies when you set out but now storm clouds are gathering as the sun begins to set. The temperature is starting to plummet. You begin to panic. And for good reason. All you brought was a down vest. If those feathers get wet, you're dead. And now it's beginning to rain.

When you're still not home two hours later, your spouse finally calls 911. A rescue team is sent out. These four guys are pros. They gather at the rendezvous point, turn on their headlamps, then head out into the night, each in a different direction.

Then, you see it, a little light flickering off in the distance. It's got to be more than a mile away -- whoever is wielding the light is still so far off they couldn't begin to hear you if you yelled--and it's just a little flicker, this beam. A wavering dot of light cast by only one headlamp.

But it's enough for you. You feel hope flutter up in your chest, like a little bird inside of you. If you turn your head even a few degrees, you'll lose sight of the light and the vast darkness all around you will immediately swallow you up.

So you train your eyes on that little dot, and you keep them zeroed in on it and you head straight for it. An hour later, you're home, safe and warm, eating the soup your husband has kept simmering on the stove for you.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Friends, we don't have to flavor all the water in Lake Superior, we just have to make the water in that one pot of soup come alive. We don't have to flood the entire night with light. We just have to shine bright enough for one person to find their way home.

Because for that one person, that one little light can make the difference between finding their way home and freezing to death, alone in the night.

As many of you will know, Nick Kristof is an op/ed writer for the New York Times. He's a national level thought leader, a man whose opinions are read by literally millions of people every week. It's a position of immense privilege and enormous influence.

And he owes it all to one small group of people whom his father met before Nick himself was even born. Turns out this group was comprised of the members of the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Oregon.

And it just so happens that one day in 1952, they decided that if they were indeed the light of the world, as Jesus claimed they were, then they owed it to the world not to hide that light under a bushel. They were going to let it shine.

It was not necessarily an easy decision. The Soviet Union had aggressively claimed its share of the spoils of WWII, which is to say, they had already colonized much of Eastern Europe and had made it clear to the United States, their former ally, that in the race for global domination, they were just getting started.

The world came to know what followed as the Cold War. Aptly named, really, as in, the cold that comes when darkness falls. In this moment of gathering darkness, First Presbyterian's decision to let their light shine made all the difference for Nick's dad.

The problem was that for all practical purposes, Wladyslaw Krzysztofowicz was lost. He'd spied for the Soviets against the Nazis. But he was not himself a Russian national, and the Soviets didn't want him. In fairness, he didn't particularly want them, either.

He was, in effect, a global refugee. Nobody wanted him, it seemed. Until the people of the First Presbyterian Church declared that they did. They officially sponsored his entry to this country. So, with their support, Wladyslaw Krzysztofowicz boarded a ship bound for the United States.

As Nick tells it, when the ship approached the New York Harbor, "a white-haired [lady] from Boston chatted with him and quoted the famous lines from the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"¹

¹ This story can be found in full in the New York Times, January 28, 2017, edition.

Nick's dad spoke little English and it was clear he didn't fully understand what this nice lady was saying. So she wrote the words down for him and handed him the paper, saying, "Keep it as a souvenir, young man." Then as she was walking away, she corrected herself: "Keep it as a souvenir, young American."

As Nick writes, "[My dad] kept that scrap of paper and marveled that he — a refugee who had repeatedly faced death in the Old Country for not belonging — now somehow counted as an American even before he had set foot on American soil, even before he had learned English. It was an inclusiveness that dazzled him, that kindled a love for America that he passed on to his son."

"That strand of hospitality represents the best of this country. [It also represents the best of the church. First Presbyterian] sponsored Krzysztofowicz even though he wasn't a Presbyterian, even though he was Eastern European at a time when the Communist bloc posed an existential threat to America. He could have been a spy or a terrorist."

A couple of weeks ago Nick Kristof flew back to Portland to meet with the congregation.

They were thinking of once again sponsoring a refugee and they had some questions for him, which he was glad to answer. But mostly he wanted to thank them for what they had done for his father.

Were there risks in bringing him to this country? Yes.

Did it solve the larger problems the world was facing at that tumultuous moment in history? No.

Did it solve the global refugee problem in 1952? No it did not. This one case didn't even make a dent in it.

But, as Nick put it, it was completely transformative for the Kristof family. Completely transformative.

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus said. You are the light of the world.