

Sermon: Rags to Riches, Darkness to Light
Text: Matthew 5:13-20
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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

Sometimes I wonder whether it's even possible to understand the Bible.

What I mean is, everything was so different when the Bible was written -- including the meaning of basic words -- that I sometimes wonder if it's even possible for those of us living in the modern world to understand these ancient texts and stories.

Let me give you a very basic example of why I say this.

When I say the word "salt" what words do you think of? Morton's, kosher, table, iodized, rock, sea.

Whatever size it might come in, whatever shape, whatever the source, most of us think of salt as nothing more than a condiment. Something to add some zest to our soup, some pizzazz to our popcorn.

But if you said the word "salt" to a person in the first century, the list of responses would be far broader and much richer.

Because in the ancient world salt was not just a condiment. It was a luxury, a treasure, even. Kings sometimes used it to pay their soldiers -- which is why "salt" is the root of the word "salary." I would imagine the soldiers then promptly traded this valuable commodity what they needed and wanted: for food, for better weapons, for beer, being soldiers.

Salt was also used to ward off evil spirits and to cleanse wounds and heal the blood.

Salt was money and it was medicine. But it was more than that, too.

Salt was believed to be a little bit magical. It was used to ward off evil spirits, and it was believed that rubbing salt on the skin could make couples more fertile.

In the first century, salt was all these things. Poor people had a hard time getting their hands on it. But even so, every single person who heard Jesus say that phrase, “You are the salt of the earth,” would have known that salt was all of these things.

So imagine what people heard when Jesus made this amazing declaration.

I am the salt of the earth? Really? What I hear you saying is that I am a treasure. I am medicine. I have the power to heal. I have the power to defend against evil. I have the power to create life.

Same with light. We take light for granted. We flick tens switches a day and, presto, all ten rooms we enter instantly become brighter. It’s not something we have to make or create. It is available on demand, instantly, everywhere we go. Nowadays, most of us carry a light source in our pockets.

Our cities are flooded with light, our homes are awash in it. So much so that darkness is not something that slows us down.

Let’s say that sun is suddenly totally eclipsed by the moon, and deep shadow covers the earth. Sure, you go outside to take in this remarkable event. But because the kids are hungry, you head back into the kitchen, flick a switch to turn on the light above the stove, and you go back to cooking dinner.

Not so in the first century. If the sun were to suddenly totally be eclipsed by the moon panic would ensue. Because the sun was the primary source of light. If the sun disappears, it’s game over.

Of course at night the only light visible anywhere on earth came from the moon or from flames -- large flames or small. Bonfires or hearth fires, torches or candles.

Now imagine that a charismatic new preacher appears on the scene and declares:
You are the light of the world.

What do you make of this? It's like saying, You make life possible. You make plants grow. You are a candle in the night, a torch to light the way home. A bright hot glow to ward off wolves or hyenas.

I so wish modern people could somehow come to appreciate what these phrases might have meant to the people who first heard them.

What it might have meant to someone who dressed in rags to be called a royal treasure. For a people who, as the prophet foretold, lived in a land covered in deep darkness -- the darkness of empire and occupation -- for them to be compared to a candle, or a torch, or the sun.

And I so wish the church could fall in love again with the guy who first made these astonishing declarations. I understand our history.

I get that the church has developed catechisms and creeds and confessions to serve as teaching tools, to guide us in the way we understand and practice our faith.

But imagine if all of us church folk could leave all of that behind, just set aside all our rules and regulations and dos and don'ts and policies and procedures and creeds and confessions -- even for just a few days -- and just live like we are treasures, or candles.

Imagine the difference it might make in the world if every preacher preached these things: you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Imagine the difference it might make in the world if every person who heard these words believed them.

I am a treasure. I have the power to heal. I have the power to bring light into the darkness.

Yes, that's all well and good, you say, but it's also just poetry. All theory, no practice. What would it actually look like in reality to be the salt of the earth? Or to be the light of the world?

How do we make a bland situation a little more savory? How do we make dark spaces brighter?

It might be easier than you think. In these highly polarized times, at this moment in the life of our country that feels so dark to so many of us, it may come down to something amazingly simple. It may come down to just listening.

David Topping is an advocate for the rights of LGBTQ persons, mainly because he is among that group.

In 2018, in his home state of Massachusetts, legislation was on the ballot that would roll back rights and protections for LGBTQ persons.

So he and some queer friends and straight allies went door to door but not with the intent of persuading people. They went with the intention of listening to them. He called it “deep canvassing.”

They listened, nonjudgmentally, which opened the way for conversation.

For David, it was risky talking to people who had the power to hurt him with their votes, and their words. “I came out two years ago now,” he writes, “and one of the hardest things for me has been talking with folks who don’t understand [my gender identity], and not immediately writing someone off because they don’t immediately get it,” he says.¹

He calls this “giving them grace.” It’s a powerful idea: “Giving grace ... means being able to hear someone say something that can be hurtful, and trying to think about how to have a real conversation and connect with them.”

Remember when it was possible to do that? To connect as human beings? When the first thing we all talked about was not the president, or impeachment, or policy, or the primaries? When we talked about our lives?

It’s risky listening to people, even if you’re not seeking their vote. Nowadays, strike up a conversation with a stranger and there is a better than even chance you’re going to hate what they say.

Or even among your friends, you’re likely going to believe that the candidate they’re going on and on about is too old or too young, or too left or too right, to get elected.

¹ The full story is available here:

<https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing>

And within thirty seconds you may feel much more like yelling or arguing than like listening.

But ask yourself, how many minds have ever been changed by arguing? None. How often will you succeed if you try this approach? Never.

But here's the thing, the wonderful thing. If you can get past those feelings, you may find that something surprising happens. Something sort of magical.

You may find that within just a few minutes you're no longer talking about the president, or impeachment, or policy, or the primaries.

You may find that you're talking about life. And if you listen for just a little while longer, your conversation partner may begin to open up to you about their life, about how their daughter Melody is transitioning with the goal of becoming their son Michael and how confusing that is, how unprepared they are for that.

Or about how easy it used to be to pay their bills when they worked at the Beacon plant and how hard it is now that they bag groceries at Ingles.

Or how lonely they are since their wife died two years ago, and how they no longer go to church anymore because it's too hard to go alone and sit in the pew they shared for forty years with their spouse.

And just like that you may have an opportunity -- and you're going to hate this --- you may have an opportunity to invite them to come to church with you! Gasp!

If you think it's impossible to build bridges of friendship and goodwill in these angry times, I know of somehow who would disagree -- though she would likely do it very politely.

Even now, when choosing what to have for breakfast can be seen as a political and divisive act, Dolly Parton is considered the great unifier. She is maybe the only person about whom that can be said these days.

Which is a little surprising, because there's no doubt about what Dolly Parton believes, or where she falls on the political spectrum. Her song 9 to 5 is the most popular feminist anthem of all time.

To this day it continues to be used far more frequently at political rallies for female candidates than anything Janice Joplin or Joni Mitchell ever wrote.

Dolly has written songs about deportees, naming her friends Juan and Rosalita. She sings about miners' rights and workers' rights.

She is not neutral, in other words. She stands for something. She loves the same people Jesus loved, the marginalized, the dispossessed. And everybody who knows her music knows this about her.

You would think the only people who would ever come to hear her sing are members of the woke generation, hard core political activists.

But that is not the case. Go to a Dolly Parton concert, and what will you see?

Truck drivers and their wives (or, nowadays, truckers and their husbands) sitting next to glam queens, sitting next to a bus load of folks from the nearby retirement home, sitting next to Trevor and Owen, the gay couple who just got married last week, sitting next to an executive from the Monsanto plant, sitting next to a lady who just got off her shift bagging groceries at Ingles.

Dolly Parton gets criticized for not speaking out more, for not marching in women's rights, or gay rights, or gun control, or for the environment.

Some people claim she is protecting her brand. That staying out of politics is a business decision.

Which I get. I'm not neutral and neither are most of you. Sometimes to let your light shine, you have to march. When evil has a microphone, sometimes to be the salt of the earth, to preserve the things we all believe and value, you have to grab a megaphone and raise your voice.

So I get that criticism. Especially given the size of the megaphone Dolly Parton has at her disposal.

Until you realize that her insistence that everyone is welcome at her shows, and that no one is cast out, is itself not just a profoundly political stance, it's a spiritual one.

It's not a business decision. It's a religious decision. It's her theology.

It's not just her way of being salt and light. It's her way of saying that everyone who has come to hear her play is salt and light -- that they are precious and valuable not just in her sight but in God's.

Her nephew, Brian, is the head of her security detail. By his own admission, he is very outspoken about politics and there is a 98% chance he votes differently than his Aunt Dolly does 100% of the time

He has a special name for his aunt's approach to taking a stand while valuing and welcoming everyone. He calls Dollitics.²

I might call it something else. When Dolly Parton picks up her guitar and starts to sing, *I'll Fly Away*, in front of 20,000 diverse fans who immediately begin to sing along with her, I might call it church.

² This story, and the topic of "Dollitics" in general, is discussed in much more detail here: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america/episodes/dollitics>