

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

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*Matthew 5:13-20*

*'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 hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, 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.'*

*'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'*

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“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.”

If you've been out and about the past few days, I suspect that you have walked on a lot of salt. In the past few days, the city of Lexington has finally been able to test out the capacity of the new salt barn that was built last year to give us the space to store a massive amount of salt for snowy days like the past few.

I was also reminded yesterday that the absence of salt can make for a very bland meal. I made my first ever white bean turkey chili yesterday. Since I knew I would be busy yesterday at the session retreat I decided to prepare the chili Friday night. I cooked the ground turkey and then put it in the crockpot. Then I sautéed the onions and garlic in the cast iron skillet and then added those to the crockpot. Finally I added the white beans, the corn, and the chili powder, cumin, and oregano. I lovingly placed it in the fridge and then cooked it on low while I was at the session retreat yesterday.

I came home after the long meeting and the house smelled amazing. I went to the gym to walk on the treadmill for a little bit and then came home to take a shower and the smell only got stronger. My mouth was watering at the aroma. Then when I finally scooped some of the chili out and put it in my bowl and tasted it, it just tasted...meh.

I was disappointed. All that work. All that smell. And it just tasted...ok. Finally, Tricia reminded me that I forgot to add salt. And that did it. OK, she may have added a little more chili powder too but, really, it was the lack of salt that made it just mediocre.

Fortunately, adding salt was a pretty easy fix. But it speaks to the truth that its amazing what just a little bit of salt can do.

I suppose the same can be said of light. A little light can go a long way to illuminate a path in the nighttime. I'll never forget how dark it was on Shelter Island (where Tricia and I used to live), especially this time of year. Sunset during the late fall and early winter would often be around 4:30 P.M. which makes for a very long night. And being on a small island there was no light pollution, very little traffic, and little to no street lights. So, on a cloudless night you could look up and see the stars. I mean *really* see the stars. All of them. And it never ceased to amaze me how on a dark, cloudless night, a full moon could illuminate the island so brightly that you could get around just as easily as during the day without a flashlight.

Salt and light. Two simple and necessary and power things.

Salt and light is what Jesus uses to teach his followers about, well, following him.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says, “A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, 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.”

This salt and light stuff is about public witness. Notice the location of this sermon. It's not in a church. It's not in the temple. It's not in a house or structure of any kind. It's outside, in the open, on a mountain for all to see. If you close your eyes, it's not difficult to imagine Jesus gesturing widely with his arms in the great expanse as he preaches these verses.

I've mentioned before in this sermon series that Jesus' ministry was a ministry on the move. He and his disciples never stayed in one place too long but were always on the move. This is how movements begin. Think about all of the politicians during campaign seasons such as the one we are in now. The politicians don't hunker down and ask their constituents to come to them. They are the ones on the move, finding and getting to know their constituents where they are in the ordinariness of their lives. Now, I'm not suggesting that we conduct the business of the church the same way as a political campaign but there are some similarities; it's an effective way to spread news.

The bottom line is this: Jesus seemed to be teaching the early church a valuable lesson: don't isolate yourself and get too comfortable. You, the Church, are to be the salt of the earth, out and about in the world enhancing the flavor of all you encounter. It's hard to do that when you stay cooped up in a building.

Sometimes, if church buildings aren't the single worst thing that has ever happened to American Christianity. I don't know of a single pastor who - at times - resents the fact that she or he spends more time on working with the people to maintain a building that she or he spends with the people doing actual ministry. Sometimes, I wonder if the bushel basket that Jesus bemoaned in today's passage is the four walls that surround the sanctuary.

Let me tell you a story of a church that decided to free itself from that particularly bushel basket of a building. A colleague of mine, Mandy Sloan McDow, is the pastor of First United Methodist Church of Los Angeles. That congregation used to be a booming congregation of more than 6,000 people in the heart of downtown LA. However, in the 1990's people started fleeing to the suburbs and the congregation shrank to a small size. However, they were burdened with a huge building that they could not afford to maintain. So, rather than call it quits, they decided to sell the building but keep their parking lot at the corner of Flower and Olympic streets in downtown LA.

Every Sunday morning, they erects some large tents in the parking lot, set up some chairs and an PA system, and they hold services. Right there. Right out in the open for all to see. Since they're a few time zones behind us, I sometime enjoy watching their services on Facebook live. Although there are may regulars, their congregation changes each and every Sunday when passersby, sparked by curiosity, will join them. People of all races, ages, genders, and backgrounds gather to sing, pray, preach, and gather at the Lord's Table for communion.

They fund themselves by renting out their parking lot during the weekdays. And, without a building to worry about, they have a sense of freedom to focus on ministry, outreach, worship, and hospitality. If you go to their website, you will not find a picture of a building or an empty sanctuary. Rather, you'll find a picture of the skyline of downtown Los Angeles. They lovingly refer to themselves as "a church without a home." Their website says the following: "At this church, no borders divide, no walls exclude. We meet to serve, not to be served. Grace is our guide. Love is our goal. Everyone is welcomed. Everyone is loved. We remain a church without walls, without borders, without barriers. This reflects our theological openness, and the way we believe God's love should be experienced and shared."

Now *that's* one way to be the salt and light that Jesus is talking about in today's passage.

Now, before anyone has a heart attack, please hear that I'm not suggesting that we sell our building and meet in the parking lot. We live in a slightly different context than the folks at First United Methodist Church of Las Angeles, not to mention the weather is a heck of a lot nicer in LA today than it is here in Kentucky!

But, still, it begs the question, how have congregations such as ours gotten a little too comfortable inside our buildings? What are ways that we can expand our ministry outside the walls? How can we lift the bushel basket a little bit and step out of our comfort zone?

How can Beaumont Presbyterian Church be the Church in the public square?

What does it mean to be Church at Panera Bread?

What does it mean to be Church at God's Pantry or the Hope Center?

What does it mean to be Church at the Lexington Pride Festival?

What does it mean to be Church at the prison?

What does it mean to be Church at a protest or advocacy event?

What becomes possible if the Church is to leave the building?

Because, friends, *you* are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Jesus is talking to us, today, to *his* Church - a Church that should make its home not in the confines of a beautiful building but in the brokenness of the world outside it.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**