

“Being Salt, Being Light” by David Lloyd



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5th Sunday after Epiphany

When you hear this part of the good news that Matthew tells, the Sermon on the Mount, what do you hear? What do you see? From the first time I've heard it, I've heard and seen a serious Jesus, maybe even a stern Jesus, declaiming from the hillside, telling his followers what they must be, what they must do, maybe even shaking his finger at them. It has felt burdensome, something I am expected to do, a way of living I am to take on but what I suspect deep in my heart I can never live up to.

Recently I have been reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount differently. Recent scholarship is pretty certain that Matthew's gospel wasn't written

as a firsthand account by one of those who traveled with Jesus during his ministry. Rather, that gospel was written sometime

between 70 and 100 of the Common Era, which at a minimum is four decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. And rather than being written in Hebrew or Aramaic, which would have been the first language of one of Jesus' followers, it was written in Greek, which would mean Matthew's gospel was written by a Jew from outside Galilee and Judea, someone like Paul. It is generally thought that because of its many allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures and by its literary style that incorporates a style that would have alliterations and puns in Hebrew that Matthew's gospel was written by a Jewish Christian to Jews, perhaps after the first Holocaust, the Romans' destruction of the Temple and massacre of Jews throughout Palestine. Scholars believe that Matthew gospel was trying to get his fellow Jews to understand that The Way that Jesus taught was the fulfillment of Judaism as summed up in the verses we have heard, "I haven't come to abolish or replace the teaching of Moses and the prophets, but to complete it."

I began thinking that maybe in the Sermon on the Mount the writer of Matthew's gospel is being descriptive rather than prescriptive. Rather than telling potential followers how they should behave if they start following The Way, maybe the Sermon on the Mount is his description to such potential followers of how the followers of The Way already behave. Maybe this is his way of holding up a mirror to the followers of The Way so that they can see themselves as others see them.

When I read this passage this way I hear and see the writer of Matthew's gospel delighting, rejoicing, in how the followers of Jesus are living: they are blessed because they know they need God, they are currently sorrowful for the world, they have a gentle spirit, they hunger and thirst to see righteousness prevail, they show mercy, their hearts are pure, they are peacemakers, and they suffer persecution for

following The Way. People who don't yet follow The Way see how they interact with each other and regard that lifestyle as a thing of value, a way of living that is equivalent to one of the most valuable things in the world – salt! People see the followers of The Way as bringing light into their life at a time and in a culture that felt full of darkness. Seen that way, rather than feeling heavy and burdensome, the Sermon on the Mount now feels delightful to me.

Sodium chloride was one of the most precious commodities in the ancient world. Every ancient empire in the Mediterranean had a supply of this salt, whether it came from dried ponds of seawater or from mines, and it was traded throughout the region. Our word "salary" comes from the Roman word for the wages soldiers in the legions were paid to buy their salt (from the Latin word "sal"). Why was salt so valuable? Not just because it gives flavor to food, but because it preserves raw food for months before it is needed for a meal – meat can be cured with salt or corned by immersing the meat in brine, and vegetables can be brined or pickled. With the coming of refrigeration and freezers, meat that has been cured or corned, and pickled vegetables have become specialty foods rather than ordinary. You have to travel to the South – or Spain – to get a cured ham that hasn't been refrigerated, or you can travel to Portugal where you'll find salted cod in every grocery. Sure, you can buy pickles in sealed glass jars but for other pickled foods you have to go to a delicatessen. We rely so much on freezers and refrigerators that we don't think much about food preservation until a storm comes and the power goes out for more than a few hours. We need to preserve our meat and our vegetables to live and we take it for granted that we will have access to them. Perhaps we will think more frequently about this in the coming decades if we do not find alternative sources of energy to power our refrigerators and freezers. Perhaps we will recover the skills of curing and

brining and pickling with salt.

So Matthew's gospel regards the Church as the place of salt, a place that preserves what we need to live. And while each Christian is salt, each preserves what each person needs to live, when we are together, interacting with each other and with the world outside the congregation that we preserve what the whole world needs to live. Every congregation that follows the gospel is salt, the precious essence that preserves what the world needs to live. Yes, our dear Seekers Church is preserving the kind of life God wants not just each of us to have, and not just Seekers Church needs to have, but everyone in the Takoma neighborhood, everyone in the D.C. metro area, everyone in the USA, everyone in North America, everyone in the Western Hemisphere, everyone in the world needs to have.

But we look at each other and think, "But we didn't seek to be the thing that saves the world. We didn't start out wanting to be the thing that saves the Western Hemisphere, North America, the USA, the DC metro area, the Takoma neighborhood. We just wanted to worship together, to be a huddled little community of people that looks inward collectively and individually, and moves outward individually and collectively."

Matthew's Jesus knows what we are thinking. He laughs and looks directly at us and says, "Too bad! Every person, every congregation, that follows The Way is a light to the world, is a light for the world. When you are really what God as intended you to be as a people, when you are interacting as people following the Way, you simply glow! You're radiant! You're beaming! Others see it! You're a town on a hill that

can be seen a long way off. Don't try to pretend you're hidden in a lovely valley. You're elevated where everyone can see you! You are "loved of God, love's pure light. Radiant beams from thy holy face bring the dawn of redeeming grace." You can't hide that light and still be the congregation you are! It can't be hidden! It's no use complaining!"

Wow! We are light! Light is one of the most unusual things in the universe. Light sometimes acts like a wave and sometimes it acts like a particle. Philosophers and scientists argued over whether light is a wave or a particle for nearly 2000 years, until now physicists have reached a consensus that light has a mysterious duality: depending on what property is being studied, it may be considered to be a wave or it may be considered to be a particle. It's called quantum electrodynamics or quantum field theory. And that's us, we're light! Who'd a thunk that we have a mysterious duality? Atoms emit or absorb light as their energy level changes: an atom emits light when it comes in contact with another atom – the light carries off the extra energy. So we emit light when we come in contact with others; we give off extra energy. Who'd a thunk it!

What is the quality of the light that we are emitting that holds back the darkness, the quality of our salt that preserves? One thing is our willingness to be vulnerable. In our prayers, in our spiritual reports, in our oral sharing in small groups and in Interplay, and in the transparency of our budget process, we open ourselves to each other, to the world, to God. We allow ourselves to be held accountable to each other, to the Word of God in Christ through the Church. Our embrace of vulnerability, openness and accountability is quite contrary to our Western culture, especially our 21st century American culture, which emphasizes the importance of making

ourselves invulnerable, to achieve security through gaining and keeping and wielding wealth and power and in besting someone else, and avoiding accountability above all. We know that our culture is really darkness, a darkness that is death. Our vulnerability opens us up to the truthful experiences of others – to face the racism of our nation and city and even of our church in sacred conversations, to see the results of our national policy in the Mayan villages of Guatemala and the townships of South Africa and in refugees from East Africa, to see what the wide gaps of our safety net do to the lives of homeless men, to what we do to our environment for our own comfort.

A second quality of our light and saltiness is generosity. For our congregational size we give an astounding amount of money away, and we make this building available to a large number of diverse groups. And it's not just money. The time that we give each year when the Bokamoso kids come – through mentoring, driving them, being with them during Interplay, feeding them, through attending their performances, is visible.

A third quality of our light and saltiness is forgiveness. We may get upset or disgusted or angry with each other – actually we do get upset and disgusted and angry frequently – but we hang in there and allow the process of forgiveness to work. Some of us are better at it than others, but we all try.

Our vulnerability and our generosity and our forgiveness reflect the endlessly open, totally vulnerable heart of God. God's love is like the lens of a lighthouse, focusing the light that shines that love far out into the darkness. Our love is more like the lower lights in the lighthouse, visible

to those close to shore who may be underneath the powerful light of the lighthouse. And just as salt is needed, the lower light is needed.

Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From His lighthouse evermore
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning[i]
Send a gleam across the wave
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

Dark the night of sin has settled
Loud the angry billows roar
Eager eyes are watching, longing
For the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning
Send a gleam across the wave
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

Trim your feeble lamp, my brother!

Some poor seaman, tempest-tossed

Trying now to make the harbor

In the darkness may be lost.

Let the lower lights be burning

Send a gleam across the wave

Some poor fainting, struggling seaman

You may rescue, you may save.

Matthew's gospel goes on to make it clear that the teaching of Moses is still valid; it is still the teaching for us. What is that teaching? The two-part essence of the teaching of Moses is to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. How do we know this? Because that is how Jesus lived and he invites us to do the same in our lives. "Come and follow me." That two-part essence is the Law didn't end, won't end. When we act as salt, as light, when others know we are Christians by our love, that teaching continues.

The thing about salt is that it can lose its saltiness, its essence that preserves. The thing about light is, the closer we are to it, the brighter it seems. When we are close to it, there is no darkness. When we are away from it the darkness starts to equal it and when we are far enough away, it is all darkness. The light still has the same intensity at its

source but our distance makes it seem weaker. So the light from this candle on the altar or from the peace and justice candle is the same strength when we approach it for Eucharist or when we are standing in the circle or when we are outside this building, but it feels weaker.

So we need to come back to each other, come back to the altar, come back to the circle for Eucharist, to remind ourselves from where our saltiness and our light comes. When we celebrate the Eucharist our saltiness is restored, we take on more light. In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to regain some saltiness, to take on more light to emit. There is salt in the bread we will eat and if we look into the cup we take from the tray we will see a reflection of light, the reflected Light of Christ. But just in case, I've brought you some salt, some light, to take home with you in case you feel you are losing your saltiness and your brightness between today's Eucharist and the next one a month away.

Be the salt you are intended to be. Be the light that lights the shore.

[i] Composed by Philip Bliss, **The Charm: A Collection of Sunday School Music (Chicago, Illinois: Root & Cady, 1871)**, inspired by a sermon of Dwight L. Moody.