

Thus far in the Gospel of Matthew we have gone from the wisemen's journey to visit the toddler Jesus to adult Jesus' baptism where God identifies Jesus as his beloved Son- his and our core identity- and then God's Spirit sends Jesus out to begin his ministry with a first stop in the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for 40 days. But Jesus withstood the temptation of evil because he knew who and whose he was. He knew his identity as God's beloved child. After the wilderness, Jesus went to Nazareth, his ministry headquarters, and then on to Capernaum, where he called the first of his four disciples, who were fishermen, saying to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people." After inviting them, we're told that immediately they followed him and, Jesus' fame spread as he went and ministered to crowds of people. After that Jesus went up the mountain, just as Moses had done on Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, and Jesus taught his disciples and all gathered there. He preached what is known as the Sermon on the Mount which lasts for three chapters in Matthew's Gospel. Talk about a long sermon? In Luke's Gospel the sermon is much shorter and called the "Sermon on the Plain." Right before today's scripture, we find the first section of the Sermon on the Mount: when Jesus more than likely shocks his listeners with the Beatitudes, all nine of them. Blessed are: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are reviled and persecuted. After Jesus blesses, he continues to instruct his disciples and any listening. In today's passage, Jesus focuses on the missional identity of his disciples- what disciples of Christ are to be and do in this world. Before we listen to God's word, let us pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 5:13-16.**

I'm reading a new book entitled, *People Get Ready: Twelve Jesus-Haunted Misfits, Malcontents, and Dreamers in Pursuit of Justice*. The book opens in the Foreword by Charles Marsh with a story about a letter that German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the occasion of the baptism of the infant son of a dear friend of his. In this letter, Bonhoeffer spoke of a powerful Christian witness. Bonhoeffer criticized the German church in 1944 for losing its capacity to make real the word of reconciliation and redemption in the world. He wrote, "We have learnt rather too late, that action comes, not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility." Along with the letter to his friend, Bonhoeffer also sent an outline concerning the possibility and future of Christianity in the aftermath of war. In this outline, Bonhoeffer wrote these words, "The church is the church only when it exists for others. The church will share in 'the secular problems of ordinary human life,' not by overwhelming others with our cleverness but in being with, through generosity and service, as instruments of peace and steadfastness, taking the field 'against the vices of hubris, power, worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil.'" Bonhoeffer strongly argues that "we are of us when, and only when, we assume Christ's posture of being in the world." We do that by following Christ and asking the Spirit to help us exemplify him. Bonhoeffer concludes his outline saying, "The most important questions about our character can only be answered by the witness of our entire lives." Ten months later from penning his thoughts, Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in the concentration camp at Flossenbug. In today's scripture, Jesus uses two metaphors, salt and light, to describe who his followers- his disciples- are and what they do for and in the world. Here he gives them and us our missional identity: what we are sent out in the world to do- how we are to interact in the world. **A few thoughts and**

**observations:** During Christmas, I was visiting with family and friends and one of my friends told me that she had gone a few days before to collect salt. Puzzled, I asked her to say more. She drove to the NC Coast and had a few huge pickle jars and filled them to the brim with ocean water. She brought them back to Asheville, sat them outside and let the water evaporate. It took weeks. Then she got what she was hoping for: only salt remaining in the jars. She then took the salt to make bath products. As she was talking, I remembered that this is what the people did in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. They took ocean water in containers and let it evaporate to procure salt. Salt and light are both precious commodities- and probably even more so back in Jesus' day. However, most of us take both of these life-sustaining elements for granted. Salt was used for a variety of purposes such as: a seasoning, a preservative, a healing agent, and in religious ceremonies involving sacrifices or covenants. "From the beginning of civilization until about one hundred years ago, salt was one of the most sought after commodities in human history. The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits. Roman soldiers were often paid in salt- that's where the phrase "worth your salt" comes from. Nowadays, we still use salt for many purposes" (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)), but it is no longer special. When Jesus mentioned salt losing its saltiness, folks listening to him would have thought it crazy to waste something as precious as salt. When Jesus calls his listeners "the salt of the earth," he is saying something profound, something we may miss in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context unless we pay close attention. Jesus also is saying something profound to his listeners when he calls them "the light of the world." A lit lamp illuminates dark places, a function that would be limited, if not eliminated, by putting it under a basket. Most folks listening then probably would have chuckled at the ridiculous idea of covering up

light because they needed it to see. In other words, one would want to place a lit lamp in a place where it could give off as much light as possible. Back then they didn't have the luxury of flipping on a switch. They had to burn oil lamps or light candles for illumination in the dark. As with salt, light was and is basic and beneficial to human life.

Another observation in this text is that the "you" here is second person plural: Y'all, you folks or you guys. Also, notice that Jesus says, "Y'all ARE..not "y'all should or could be," OR "Y'all ought to be," OR Y'all will be if or when." No! This is said in present tense. Y'all ARE salt and light NOW! And to whom does the y'all refer? Who is this "special class of salty, light-bearing people" to whom Jesus preaches (Nadia Bolz Weber, [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com))? Most scholars believe that Jesus is addressing those he just blessed: the poor in spirit, the humble, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who show mercy, those who have pure hearts, those who are persecuted and presumably also those with various diseases and pains. In other words, the hungry, the sick, the crippled, the frightened, the hopeless, the outcast, the addicted...these are the folks to whom Jesus said, "Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world." Y'ALL. You folks who are (or who about to be) reviled and persecuted. Y'all who are not "cleaned up and shiny and well-fed and fashionable. Y'all who have been rejected, wounded, unloved, and forgotten. Y'all are essential. Y'all are worthwhile. You all are valuable. You folks matter. Y'all have purpose, and I am commissioning you all. "Jesus knowingly names commodities that were priceless in his time and place. He conferred great value on those who did not consider themselves valuable. He is still doing this. For us. Now" (Thomas). Nadia Bolz Weber, a

Lutheran pastor, puts it this way, “I mean, perhaps there were people in the crowd who totally had their stuff together. People who had solid relationships and had paid off their student loans and [who had never hurt a friend] and always backed up their hard drives. People who had nothing they felt shame about and who didn’t have terrible secrets and knew exactly what they were doing. Of course that is possible those people were in the crowd, it’s just, that’s not who we are told were coming to Jesus. The ones we are told were coming to Jesus, the ones presumably to whom he was preaching, were described as the sick, those who were in pain, who fought with demons, who were broken and addicted and late on their back taxes. In other words, they were people standing in need of God” (patheos.com). And who among us isn’t standing in the need of God?

Jesus doesn’t give any condition to meet in order to be salt of the earth or any standards of perfection or wholeness to fulfill in order to be light to the world. He looks out on a crowd of people who have been broken open, who have been persecuted and ostracized and says, “Y’all are salt. Y’all are light.” Those are statements, not requirements. They’re declarations- not exhortations. They’re pronouncements about the way things are, no matter the circumstances. And the thing about salt and light is that they don’t exist for themselves. “They only fulfill their purpose when used, poured out” (workingpreacher.org, Amy Oden). Jesus’ disciples are to live and work for others...for the whole world, not for themselves. “Jesus’ followers are not to withdraw from the world that persecutes them, but are to engage that world in ways that have a beneficial effect upon it. They are to do this through the performance of good works- acts of mercy and peacemaking done with a pure heart” (*HC Bible Commentary*, Mark Allan Powell, p.

875). Acts such as the ones shown by Berry Washington in Louisville, KY. I heard about Berry a few years ago as I cooked dinner, listening to the CBS Nightly News. Berry owns Berry's Cheesesteaks, and he tries to greet everyone with love and to extend a helping hand to his employees, many of whom have come from troubled pasts. That, he says, is his real mission. "We can't keep looking at everyone as a problem," says Berry. "We've got to look for a solution." One day Berry witnessed two teenage brothers, Sean and DJ, throwing bottles at cars from a nearby balcony. Berry summoned the boys down to talk. "He gave us a long, long, long speech," said Sean. Berry told the brothers that he was no saint either, as years ago he dealt drugs and even was homeless. That is until prayer and a stranger's kindness changed his life. Berry is also a pastor, and he joked that God uses him to bring church through cheesesteak. He offered Sean and DJ a job, taught them how to cook and now they spend most of their free time keeping out of trouble and working in the restaurant. Berry is not only being salt and light in the world, he also saw that Sean and DJ were salt and light, and he helped them to claim it. I realized as I was listening that I, too, was drawn in by Berry's humility. Berry's good works revealed less of Berry and more of his source: God. Thus, witnessing Berry for only a few minutes, I could see how the brothers were curious about why he does what he does and about his faith in God.

"Jesus explicitly gives his disciples the second best blessing of all: the knowledge that they are of use to the world- 'salt of the earth.' The deepest desire of Christians, after loyalty to God in Jesus, is to be used by Jesus to help people and to participate in God's kingdom" (*The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, Frederick Dale Bruner, p. 188).

Jesus says, “Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.” In talking about “good things,” Matthew insists that faith be accomplished in action. It’s one thing to know and to claim your identity as Christ’s disciples. It’s another thing entirely to live it. When we do live our faith daily for others, we give God glory. People see us and ask, “Why are you serving on a Saturday morning? What made you walk away instead of giving in to the temptation? Why are you standing up to yet being loving to a bully?” Our actions point not to us, but to God. And Jesus reminds them and us that as God’s people, we’re reflecting Christ’s light. He’s also reminding them and us to whom all glory belongs...to God and to God alone. “Jesus’ words are meant to wake us, to remind us of what we carry in our bones: the living presence of the God who bids us to be salt in this world in all our savory particularity; to be light in the way that only we can blaze” (Jan Richardson).

So...“don’t wait until you feel as though you have met the conditions of being holy. Trust that Jesus knows what he is doing. We are already salt and light. That is what we are, for better or for worse. Let’s hope it’s for better. Don’t lose your saltiness. Don’t hide your light. And then, for the love of God, take it seriously. May our pouring out be for the life of the world that God so loves...for the world desperately needs it” (NBW, [patheos.org](http://patheos.org)).

Amen.