

Matthew 5:13-16

Has there ever been a time when your job or role threw you into a situation where you felt completely unqualified and ill-equipped for a job. Maybe you were asked to sing a song or make a presentation in front of hundreds of people. Maybe you had to defend a position before a governing body. Moms and dads, remember when you held your newborn for the first time? Now that's an "I'm over my head" feeling if there ever was one.

I don't know how you step into these situations but here's what I do. It's called the three Ps. 3 words: Preparation, Prayer and Pretend.

I remember the first time I moderated session, and then a congregational meeting. So scary! Did I know what I was doing? NO,-- well not at first. So what did I do?

I prepared-- I read up on it, I made sure I knew exactly what to do... I PRAYED, And then I just did it.

I say the word PRETEND, not because it's all an act, but because the word comes from the latin, praetendere, which means to stretch forth or put forward. There's a bit of pretending in the sense that, while we may feel completely inadequate, it's our role—we're the teacher or the manager or the police officer or the elder or deacon or mom or the pastor--its our job so we step into that role and just do it.

In our passage Jesus says,

YOU ARE SALT. YOU ARE LIGHT. It is a declaration of truth. Jesus doesn't say, "I hope you will become" the light of the world, or "if you do this, this and this" you will be the light of the world, Or if you prove to me you can handle this responsibility, Or once you feel up for the job you are the salt, you are light... No, Jesus simply says a statement about the way things are.

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

THAT is your call. THAT is your role... So we are to live into our calling and be who God has called us to be.

..Simply because we've had an encounter with Jesus- (set apart in baptism?) that's all that qualifies us to be salt and light for God's Kingdom.

So the question of the hour is, what does it mean to be salt and light? How are we called to live into our role as the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Let's begin by talking about just how essential these components are.

I'll start with salt.

As we shake salt from our shakers we don't often think about how we cannot live without it. I have a friend who continues to have to go to the hospital because her sodium is too low.

Think about it: our tears, blood, sweat- all of these are salty solutions, reminding us that salt is essential to what makes our bodies function properly.

For Jesus and his contemporaries, salt was integral to their way of life. Since they didn't have any kind of modern refrigeration, salt was used to preserve fish and meat. It was used, of course, to flavor food, but also to soothe toothaches and treat wounds.

So as all these different images come to mind around salt think of what this means for the calling Jesus has put on all of us.

When he says, "You are the salt of the earth, He is saying YOU are a substance that promotes life...(see above) You are a purifying agent. A seasoning. A healing salve. A preservative, i.e. Something that keeps everything else from rotting.

This is how Paul uses the analogy. He says, Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.⁶ Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Moving to the light.

Just as it's easy for us to take salt for granted nowadays, so it is with light. Just think of those times when all the power goes out in your house, and even after several hours of having no electricity, we still go into every room flicking the light switch.

For us it's a modern convenience, but we often forget that we cannot exist without the sun for energy and for food, for our very survival.

For those in Jesus' day, light was precious. Because of course, they couldn't just flick on a light switch and there were no street lights lining the roads.

Can you imagine that?

So since salt and light are needed for our very survival, we need to see the correlation that GOD HAS DECLARED US to be an essential ingredient to ensure that the world gets exactly what it needs and that it is led exactly where it needs to go.

We are entrusted as the vehicle that shows people the exact flavor of who God is. It sounds funny, but what taste do we leave in peoples' mouths? We're the ones who will shine the path that leads to God. Do our lives help steer others toward Christ?

A few observations on what this kind of life entails:

One thing about salt- it's no good on its own. Am I right? None of us carries around packages of salt just to pour into our mouths for enjoyment at any given moment? It only tastes good when it's IN FOOD. That means we've got to get out there, outside these church walls, in the community, in those precise places where the earth needs to be salted.

Being too salty that we turn people off isn't the way to do it, but interesting, this actually is not the warning Jesus gives in our passage. Instead, Jesus says, "Whatever you do, don't lose your saltiness!"

With the light Jesus says, "Don't hide it (that's ridiculous!), but put it on a lamp stand so it'll give light to everyone in the house."

So an important question to ask is, what keeps us/you/me from living as salt and light? What keeps us from speaking out when there is an injustice (Injustice that we read in the papers as well as gossip in the fellowship hour). What keeps us from reaching out to someone who's lost their way? For looking for opportunities to share our faith?

I believe it's the perfect time to be asking these questions.

Because today is the first Sunday of Lent. We have these 40 days before Easter to reflect upon Jesus' death and sacrifice, and the implications they have for our own lives.

Last week Jesus told his disciples they must deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow him.

Today Jesus commands something similar. He says, "let your light shine before others so they may see your good works, and glorify GOD who is in heaven..."

(This happened to me this week.) I was in a conversation that was somewhat heated. There was disagreement. And I was silent on things I wish I had spoken up about. Later I thought of what I really wanted to convey, the words I'd wished I'd said, Why didn't those things happen the first time?

One thing's for sure, I wasn't thinking about letting my light shine before others "so they may see my good works, and glorify God who is in heaven."

I wasn't thinking about God at all.

I was thinking about myself.

I wanted to be liked.

I wanted to smooth things over, not make waves.

I just really like what feels comfortable.

I don't know about you, but I need more time to sort through this issue! If you ever think I stand up here as an expert on these things, you'd be wrong. I have as much struggle as anybody else.

And so I decided that for the rest of Lent I would preach a sermon series called, "Less is More." It'll focus on Jesus words, "Whoever wants to save ones life must lose it" and "whoever wants to be first must be last" and "if you want to be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me."

Each week we will focus on someone who has lived this truth. How did they give up and what was the result, for themselves and those around them?

I'd like to leave you w/ this image of the light.
Some of you know that I spent a couple of years in Thailand after graduating from Whitworth.

One weekend Scott, a missionary in Laos, invited my teaching partner and me to accompany him on a visit to this one village. I can still remember that bumpy five hour ride through the jungle, and I can still picture the huts- huts on stilts- that lined the hillside.

We were welcomed into one of these huts where two of the village leaders were waiting.

Dinner was prepared for us- laid out in bowls on the bamboo floor.
We got there pretty late so it was getting dark quickly—and I was glad.
Sometimes it's best NOT to see what you're eating if you're in a village hut in Laos.

But then it felt strange. It got REALLY dark! I kept wanting someone to turn on the lights- light a candle or something. But Scott was unfazed- he just kept talking to the men while Andy and I sat on the other side of the hut.

All of a sudden we heard a rustling.... The sound of all these footsteps entering the tent. Normally it'd be no big deal- but for everything to be pitch black, it was just plain eerie. At first I thought the chickens and pigs that lived underneath the huts were now coming inside! (But it was too calm for that.) My second thought was, ok, we're getting ambushed by Laotian rebels set out to kidnap the foreigners!

But then I had an idea. The flash of my camera! With one click we could see everything. There they were- huddled against the wall from us. About 15 little kids- toddlers up to age 12 or so. They squealed in delight at the sight of the flash, and then the rest of the evening we used up my role of film, laughing and giggling with our new friends—these precious hilarious, wide-eyed children.

How wonderful it was, to move from fear to absolute joy, simply because we were able to see the truth of what was happening.
The light of that flash showed us that there was NOTHING TO FEAR.
In fact, the light revealed that there was a lot to be happy about!
There was joy in that room- even though I was in an unfamiliar place—even though the darkness hid the joy at first.
Thank goodness for the light that enabled us to see it.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world." Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus as the light is all about revealing the truth about our situation- that we are in the dark without him. But with Christ there is joy- even in the hidden places. There's hope even when it's hard to see.

Have we experienced, JESUS AS THE LIGHT in our own lives? Have we experienced JESUS AS THE SALT who convicts, heals and purifies us? Because that's where it all begins, with our own encounter with Jesus-- and then we are invited to be salt and light for him.