

"SALT AND LIGHT"  
Matthew 5:13-20  
February 16, 2020  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

In a world of bad news- here is some good news. An eight year old boy from Vancouver, Washington was worried about the kids in his school who had school lunch debt. You have probably heard about this issue- it's been in the news quite a bit in the past year or so. In the 2017-2018 school year, 75% of school districts reporting to the School Nutrition Association had unpaid student meal debt. Since 2012 the median amount of meal debt has risen by 70%.

How is this even a thing?

What makes it worse are the stories of children with meal debt who are shamed by having their meals taken away from them- in front of other students. Some schools give kids with meal debt a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in place of the regular hot meal. Outrage has forced some states to pass laws that ban schools from denying students with unpaid debt their hot lunch. Again I ask, how is this even a thing?

Eight year old Keoni Ching isn't aware of the political ramifications of school lunch debt- he just knows that every kid should get lunch so he did something about it. He loves making keychains because he says they look great on his backpack. So he decided to sell his keychains for \$5 each and to give the money to his school to pay off lunch debt for others kids. As you can guess, when word of this act of kindness hit the media, Keoni's keychains sold like hotcakes. With his parents' help, he has sent them all around the country. After making and selling 300 keychains he presented a check for \$4,015 to his elementary school. \$1,000 will go to his school- \$500 will pay off current meal debt while \$500 will be used for future debt. The rest of the money will be divided between six other nearby schools to clear their lunch debt.

Lunch at Keoni's school costs \$2. Think about how tough life must be for those kids if their parents have trouble coming up with an amount that we probably spend for coffee or a candy bar without a second thought.

That is being salt and light for the world.

Our text from Matthew's Gospel this morning takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The audience for this text is both the inner circle of

his disciples and an outer circle of other people who have gathered around them to listen. This grouping of teachings that we call the "sermon on the Mount" is not so much a theological lesson as it is a call for decision and action. Jesus is not offering a set of rules to follow but rather seeks to instill a moral vision to live by. Many read this section as an impossible ideal set up by Jesus to ensure our failure.

Professor Dale Allison disagrees. He writes, *"The Sermon presents the perfect, unadulterated will of God... as it should be lived when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This explains why it is seemingly heedless of all earthly contingencies, why it is so radical, why it blasts complacency and shallow moralism, disturbs every good conscience and instills terror in those who take it seriously."*

*The Sermon is not primarily concerned with what is practical or possible in the here and now but with the unobstructed, perfect will of God. (1)*

Like pretty much everything else Jesus taught, these words are countercultural, they turn conventional wisdom on its head. They call us to new understanding and new action. From the very beginning Jesus was very clear- to his disciples and to the crowds- that he came to inaugurate a new way of living and being in the world- God's way.

Listen to the first part of this text again- this time Eugene Peterson's translation from The Message.

*"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage."*

*Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous One in heaven."*

Salt and light- two things we cannot live without. Two things that are so common we probably only notice them when they are missing. Just a little bit of each can make all the difference in the world. Ever eat a pretzel without salt? Might as well eat cardboard. Ever had a bland meal? Just a bit of salt can make it delicious. Ever been outside on a very dark night? One small flashlight can lead you home. Salt and light.

In the ancient world salt was a prized commodity- in the days before refrigeration it was a necessary preservative; it enhanced the taste of food. Salt is useful for cleansing and

purifying. Salt was part of the ancient Jewish rituals of sacrifice and it was a symbol of covenant. Human history has been shaped in deep and crucial ways by salt, from trade routes to government monopolies to popular protests as recent as Mahatma Gandhi's "Salt March." Even today our word "salary" derives from the Latin word for "a soldier's allowance for the purchase of salt." Salt is a small thing of great value.

What would we do without light? One small lamp in a dark house will bring illumination that can make the difference between life and death.

Salt and light. Neither is useful unless it is applied to a situation. Salt sitting in a shaker on your table doesn't make any difference to your dinner until it is shaken out. A beautiful chandelier is just window dressing unless the bulbs are lit. And that also applies to us.

Let's face it. In our world today, the church is overpowered, outnumbered, and often overlooked. The reality of Matthew's church is also ours- in the words of Tom Long, *"The church that lives according to the vision expressed in the (Sermon on the Mount) is a colony of the (reign) of God placed in the midst of an alien culture."* The church is *"a small group of people trying with mixed results to live out an alternative life, set down in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands them. The hardest part is not in being a Christian for a day, but being faithful day **after** day, maintaining confidence in what, for all the world, appears to be a losing cause."* (2)

Jesus knew the odds his followers were facing. He knew the odds the Jews had faced for centuries- as a small religious group in the midst of one hostile empire after another. He wanted them to know that although their numbers, power, and influence may be small- their actions still mattered; still could make a big difference in the world. And they still do.

He calls us salt and light for a reason. A little goes a long way. Salt and light both make their presence known in small amounts and in doing so transform the world around them. They don't necessarily change the whole world- just the world they inhabit. Notice that Jesus didn't call us the "sauce of the world." Sauce covers everything. We are called to be salt- one shake may be all it takes.

These words from Jesus call us to action. They refuse to let us off the hook. We are called to use our power for good. To get in the way. To give voice to the voiceless. To call people in power to account when their focus turns inward instead of outward. Disciples who refuse to act in Christ's name are like salt that sits in the shaker. Not much good for anything.

Jesus challenges us to **BE** the people of God; to care about what God cares about and to allow our hearts to be broken by the things that break the heart of God. Jesus didn't say,

"You **will** be the salt of the earth; you **might** be; you **could** be; you **should** be." He said "you **ARE** the salt of the earth. Right now. This is a promise from Jesus, not a command. He says, "This is the way things are. This is who you are, even if you don't know it yet. Even if you have forgotten. Even if you don't believe it. You **are** salt. You **are** light.

Maybe you, like me, sometimes feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the problems and fears in our world. Whenever that happens remember these words- this promise- this blessing from Jesus. You are salt. You are light. Who you are is enough. What you have to share is enough. God will bless and change the world through you- through your words, through your prayers, and mostly through your actions.

What we do matters- it matters to this family of faith and it matters to the children of God around the world.

Congressman John Lewis, the son of sharecroppers, survived beatings, prison, and humiliation as he worked for civil rights in the turbulent sixties. He still bears the scars of the wounds he received from policemen for walking across the bridge in Selma, Alabama. In his book "ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE," he writes, "*Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet.*

*As a disenfranchised citizen who yearned for change, as a child born on the dark side of the American dream, I heard the whispers of the spirit calling me to wrestle with the soul of a nation. I could see a higher vision of what this nation could be, and I say to every leader who might be entangled in the web of the status quo that when the people are ready, this nation will change.*

*Whenever the people finally reject the efforts to fragment their collective energies into warring factions and remember their divine union with one another, when they throw off material distractions and irrelevant negativity and hear their souls speak with one voice, they will rise up. And whatever is in their path will either transform or transpire." (3)*

He ends his book with these words. "*Our purpose while we are here, in the most basic sense, is to be a light that shines- to fully express our gifts so that others might see. When they witness our splendor, when we show them it is possible to shine radiantly even in the darkest night, they begin to remember they are stars also, meant to light up the world. We can be way-showers, light-bearers, and mentors of the light who encourage others to flourish, create, manifest, and glow. As each person turns on the illumination of the spirit, revealing gifts, talents, and visions for the future, we can blend our majesty in a glorious concert of communion.*

*We can burn as one unified sun that can light up our world and even our universe. This planet can smolder with imagination, burn with creativity, reverberate with love, oneness, and peace. The infinite is possible, but this beauty can only manifest through us.*

*"You are a light. You are **the** light. Never let anyone- any person or any force- dampen, dim, or diminish your light. (4)*

Thank you Congressman Lewis.

I think Jesus would agree.

May it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: INSPIRING THE MORAL IMAGINATION, Dale C. Allison, Crossroad Publishing. 1999. P. 13.*
- *MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox. 1997. P. 51.*
- *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE, John Lewis, Hachette Books, 2021.*
- *Lewis, pg. 171, 177.*

