

"SALT AND LIGHT"

Matthew 5:13-20

February 5, 2023 Service Sunday
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Who knew there were so many ways to serve? You knew, of course. You don't have to be a part of a Church of the Brethren congregation for very long before you begin to hear words about service. Many of those words are acronyms- BVS, BDM, CDS- Brethren Volunteer Service, Brethren Disaster Ministries, Children's Disaster Services. We are a serving congregation. We have had generations of our youth participate in workcamps- now known as FaithX. We gather items like health kits, school kits, and cleaning buckets for the Material Resources ministry at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, MD.

Raise your hand if you have served in any of these organizations within the Church of the Brethren.

We also serve through Church World Service (CROP Walk) and Heifer International-both birthed by the Church of the Brethren. And we don't stop with Brethren projects.

We have served through the York Community Resource Center, PADS shelter for those who are unhoused, Immigrant Solidarity Network, The Outreach House, and Interfaith Partners of Lombard and Villa Park, just to name a few. Raise your hand if you have served with any of these organizations.

You could say service is in our DNA as members of the Church of the Brethren. Service comes in many forms- it can mean a commitment of a year or more in another part of the world or it can mean giving someone in the congregation a ride to a doctor's appointment. We serve while we rebuild houses after a tornado and when we bring someone a cup of coffee during fellowship time Sunday morning.

We all have the capacity to serve- and you heard that as folks shared their stories of service this morning. At its most basic level, "serve" means to do something for someone else. It isn't all that complicated and many of you have realized that it is an essential part of your lives.

In 1981 and 82, I "accidentally" served in Brethren Volunteer Service. I say accidentally because I didn't sign up primarily for BVS, I signed up to be the coordinator of the 1982 National Youth Conference which meant that I was a volunteer. The youth conference coordinator, then, as now, is chosen by the Director of the denomination's Youth/Young Adult Ministry office.

As a volunteer, they are supported through Brethren Volunteer Service which means participating in an orientation unit prior to serving. My BVS experience started by taking a leave of absence for a year from my college education at Penn State, moving from my home in Pennsylvania to the BVS House in Elgin. From there I joined an orientation unit which participated in a two-week workcamp in rural Kentucky and then a three-week orientation at Camp Woodland Altars in Ohio. The twenty folks in my unit served all over the world and across the United States.

BVSers often describe their experience by saying "They are ruined for Life." I can't think of a better way to describe my experience. (We mean "ruined" in a good way, of course.)

Being a volunteer means leaving your home, your education, your work, your family to go somewhere else where you are needed and where you need to be. Experiences and learnings gained through BVS opened the world to me in so many ways that even when my time of service as NYC Coordinator was complete, I couldn't go back to my former understandings of the world or the church or even myself. Friendships formed through BVS are still cherished today, forty years later. My life was ruined for sure as my time as a volunteer led me, eventually, to this pulpit this morning. Sometimes it is a blessing to be ruined.

As followers of Jesus service takes on an even deeper meaning. It is our identity. This morning we catch up with Jesus and his disciples sitting on the side of a mountain in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Last week we heard a bit about the beginning of this chapter, known as the Beatitudes. You know what they are, "Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers." The larger context, chapters five through seven, is called "The Sermon on the Mount."

This 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 by which to live.

The audience for this text is both the inner circle of the disciples and an outer circle of people who have gathered around to listen. Many read this section as an impossible ideal set up by Jesus to ensure our failure.

Like just about everything else Jesus taught, these words are countercultural, they turn conventional wisdom and sometimes even common sense on its head. The words of Jesus call us to new understanding and to new action. We can't separate the two. From the very beginning Jesus was very clear- to his disciples and to the crowds who followed them- he came to inaugurate a new way of living and being in the world- God's way. And if you chose to follow Jesus- your life had to change.

This text implies two fundamental questions of life: Who are we? What are we to do? Jesus answers both questions with two metaphors. Who are we? His response: "You are salt and light."

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 be eating cardboard! Ever been outside on a very dark night? One small flashlight can lead you home.

In the ancient world salt was a prized commodity. In the days before refrigeration, it was a crucial preservative and it enhanced the taste of food. Salt is also useful for cleansing and purifying. It was part of the ancient Jewish rituals of worship and sacrifice and it was a symbol of their covenant with God. Human history has been shaped in deep and crucial ways by salt, from trade routes to government monopolies to current language. 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.

The invention of the light bulb changed the world and allowed humans to expand the ways in which they lived and traveled. And it still does. One small lamp in a dark house can mean the difference between life and death.

Salt and light. Neither is useful unless it is applied. A saltshaker sitting on your table doesn't make any difference at all to your dinner until it is shaken out. A beautiful chandelier is just window dressing until the bulbs are lit.

Jesus called us salt and light to answer the question - What are we to do? Small amounts of either can transform the world. A little goes a long way. They don't necessarily change the whole world- but they make a huge difference in the small corner they inhabit. We are called to be salt- one shake may be all it takes.

With these words Jesus is calling us to action. He refuses to let us off the hook while we enjoy a nice, quiet, private, easy, comfortable faith. He tells us we must use our power for good. To get in the way. To make good trouble. Disciples who refuse to act in Jesus's name are like salt that sits in the shaker in the cupboard or the flashlight that has dead batteries. They are not good for much of anything, except for maybe a paperweight.

He challenges us to **be** the people of God; to care about what God cares about; 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, or you **might** be the light of the world; or you **could** be; or you **should** be. He says, "You **ARE!** Right here! 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."

We don't serve others so God will love us. We serve others **because** God loves us. We can't help ourselves. If we follow Jesus, we naturally want to do as he did.

Then and now, Jesus's teachings sound crazy and impossible because he speaks from the perspective and practices of the reign of God. It's what we mean when we pray, "On earth as it is in heaven." Jesus' presence and ministry embodies everything the prophets had envisioned. His ministry blurs the boundaries between heaven and earth.

Matthew affirms the importance of what we do, not only what we think or believe. In following Jesus, we see that Christian faith is about real practice in the real world. Jesus didn't just tell the people who God is, he showed them by healing them and feeding them; by forgiving them and challenging them. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to radical obedience- to act like Jesus. In acting like Jesus, we will begin to see the world around us resembling the reign of God, a little at a time.

Matthew places the Sermon on the Mount at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry because it acts as the constitution, the working manual, for the reign of God. It tells us what we can expect in the remaining chapters of this Gospel. It describes the world Jesus came to bring to reality.

The words of Jesus don't just tell us who we are, they show us who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

We are called to serve.

We are called to be ruined for life.

You do it so well. Let's keep doing it.

Amen.