

More Salt, More Light

Matthew 5:13-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Thanks to being snowed-in for most of the past two weeks, and the extremely unusual occurrence of canceling the church service last Sunday, I've had the rare opportunity to spend a lot more time than I usually have reflecting on the biblical text for today's sermon. As it turns out, **Jesus' declaration that, "You are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world," are profoundly meaningful and instructive to the understanding of our life and mission as a congregation.**

In this month's church newsletter, I wrote about our new Visioning ministry team, and our unfolding efforts to discern where we believe God is leading this congregation in the years to come. Rest assured the process that will soon be unveiled will be an all-congregation effort. At our December meeting, we opened with sharing our thoughts on this very passage from Matthew, and how it indeed can be seen as a guiding force and a foundation for our mission and ministry as we ponder what it means to be called "the light of the world."

One reason why that is such a fitting image for this congregation is that for the past decade this church has designated itself as part of the national network of "**More Light Presbyterian**" congregations. That means that we have publicly declared ourselves as a hospitable and safe space for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons of faith; and that we have pledged ourselves to work for the full inclusion of such folks into ordained leadership positions in this denomination. Our efforts are indeed bearing fruit. Other denominations have a network of inclusive congregations similar to "More Light Presbyterians", using such names as, "Open and Affirming" (United Church of Christ – UCC), "Reconciling" (United Methodist), "Integrity" (Episcopal), "Dignity" (Roman Catholic), and "Welcoming and Affirming" (Baptist).

Here at College Hill, we have broadened that understanding of being "More Light" to include a wide-ranging ministry of inclusiveness. One example of that has been the formation of an Immigrant Hispanic Fellowship here at College Hill.

For many of you newer members and visitors, you may not be aware of the **origin of this name, "More Light."** Interestingly, it dates back to a 17th century Puritan preacher from England named John Robinson. Robinson delivered a final address to the Pilgrims upon their departure to the New World in 1620. Bemoaning the current state of Reformed churches in that era, Robinson stated:

You see the Calvinists. [That's us.] They stick where he left them, a misery much to be lamented. For though they were precious shining lights in the Times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light as that they had received.

From this sermon, a hymn was written in 1850 by George Rawson entitled, "We Limit Not the Truth of God." The refrain that is sung at the end of each verse declares, "**O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.**"

This notion that God continues to reveal God's will, and the reminder that we should continue to reform our hearts and minds – and yes, our theology and biblical interpretations – in light of new knowledge and understanding, is indeed a guiding force in providing direction for our ministry efforts.

Now here's something else that many of you may not know concerning this phrase "More Light." Did you know that refrain from John Robinson's message is contained within our own denomination's Constitution, the Presbyterian **Book of Order**? I just learned this myself as I was teaching the Presbyterian Polity class at Phillips Theological Seminary last semester. A fairly obscure chapter on the procedure for amending our church's constitution begins with these words of justification:

CHAPTER XVIII AMENDMENTS

G-18.0100

G-18.0101 Reform by Amendment

1. Reform

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would be faithful to the Lordship of Christ and to its historic tradition of the Church re- formed always reforming, by the Spirit of God. In this faith, amendment procedures are understood as a means to faithfulness as **God breaks forth yet more light from God's Word.**

That may indeed be a good mantra for progressive Christians in this day and age. Perhaps most profoundly, approaching God and scripture in this manner has led us to an ever more inclusive approach to accepting and reaching out to *all* people as children of God.

Let's take a closer look now at this passage from Matthew 5 and continue to reflect upon its implications for the life and ministry of this congregation. As it turns out, it helps to interpret these two metaphors, of being salt and light, in context of what immediately precedes them – the **Beatitudes**. The last time we gathered, two weeks ago, we looked at those familiar passages that open what is called the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). As mentioned, their intention was *not* to provide some kind of impossible measuring stick or "entrance requirements" for disciples to enter the kingdom of God. Rather, they were meant to comfort and reassure the community of faith that no matter what circumstances in life we may find ourselves in, God is present and providing blessings.

In the wake of the Beatitudes, Matthew offers a collection of the sayings of Jesus to expound upon the meaning and cost of discipleship. In today's reading, verses 13-16, he continues with another blessing, perhaps one of the greatest of all. Using the metaphors of "salt of the earth" and "light of the world," we are reminded that we are of use to the world; that we are called by God to be a blessing not just to ourselves, but also to the entire world. For Jesus tells those who followed him, not that they are the light of the *community of faith*, but that they are the light of the *world*.

It's critical to note that before Jesus tells his disciples, and that includes us, what we are to do, he tells us who we are. Jesus does not say that disciples should be, ought to be, or must become like salt or light. Rather, he emphatically states, "You are salt and light." Jesus does not say that we need to try harder to be salt and light, he says that we already are, and we need to live into that reality!

That's a remarkable affirmation. But not too surprisingly, that is followed with a challenge. Salt, whether used to flavor or preserve food, has a purpose and a function. Jesus says that if salt loses its saltiness, it is no longer fulfilling its purpose and isn't much good to anyone.

How does that apply to us? The challenge for us isn't to *become* salty (for I'd say we have more than our share of salty folks here in this congregation), but rather to *stay* salty. And to what is Jesus referring when he calls upon us to stay salty? **It means to persevere in continually working to be relevant, and to fulfill our purpose and function as the church – which means to carry on Jesus' ministry of love, forgiveness, compassion, inclusion, and justice.**

There was an ancient Greek ethic that urged people to "Become what you should be." Jesus replaces this with the Christian ethic, "Become what you already are." In Jesus' teaching, wholeness stands as God's gift at the beginning and not at the end.

Yet, Jesus challenges us, as individual disciples and as a community of faith, to be involved in mission - mission in and with the world. Jesus lovingly takes us here by the collar and says, "God has made you into something special, now act upon it." **He implores us not to hide our light under a bushel basket, but to let it shine forth for all to see, to be like a shining city on a hill – College Hill.** This congregation has taken and must continue to take very seriously our call to mission and ministry, both within and without these church walls.

Jesus says we should let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works, and why? *To give glory to God.* **In these two seemingly simplistic metaphors of salt and light, we have before us the purpose of the church: we are called to a life of discipleship that will have real and visible consequences in the world, and we are told that the true goal of our activity is to glorify God, not ourselves.** We are not to work for approval, a kind of Protestant work-ethic righteousness, and we are not to sit still in a passive, ineffective life of piety. We are to live boldly for God.

So it is important to keep first things first, to lay the right foundation for our mission and ministry. The foundation of Christian existence is the grace of God – like God's blessings as found in the Beatitudes. **Recognizing who we are and that we are already in God's favor is not only the preface to our work as disciples, it is the engine that empowers our good works.**

We will only be able to understand the demanding commands that follow in this Sermon on the Mount, which we will look at in the weeks ahead, if we read them in light of God's empowering presence and blessings.

Through the visioning process that lies before us in the coming months, let us continue to pursue ministry as salty, enlightened people of faith. Believe me, it is making a big difference within this city, this presbytery, and beyond. **For authentic discipleship demands that we, as a community of faith, provide more light in an often-dark world.**

Amen.