

Salt & Light

Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In the 1970s I guided canoe trips into the Boundary Waters Wilderness of northern Minnesota and the adjacent Quético Provincial Park in Québec. We'd put in just outside of Ely, Minnesota, and then, our Forest Service maps in hand, paddle the crystalline lakes and portage through the wilderness to the next lake for a week or ten days, sometimes longer.

On one of those lakes, Cherry Lake, I had a spiritual experience during the summer of 1977 that changed the direction of my life. I'll probably tell you about that someday, but today is not the day. I want to talk instead about darkness. We who live in proximity to urban areas have little notion of darkness, so being out in the wilderness exposes you to darkness – real, inky darkness.

On many of these trips, I took groups of delinquent boys from Michigan. These were not hardened criminals by any means, but they were kids that had run afoul of the law in one way or another. The courts called them “status offenders,” which applied to truancy issues, more often than not.

I remember one night we camped on one of the more traveled lakes, a place where black bears regularly made the rounds of the campsites, searching for food. These teenage boys were, to say the least, frightened of bears. And it was a dark night – total blackness. Sure enough, the bear arrived and started nosing around for food. I'd instructed the campers to make noise in such an event. And they did, shouting and banging on pots and pans until the bear finally decided to move onto the next campsite.

Then, after the excitement, came the task of tidying up the campsite. I turned around and witnessed a half dozen or more of my tough, hard-guy campers standing all in a line, their flaps open, relieving themselves into the woods.

Darkness can be frightening. We don't know what lurks there in the darkness. It could be a bear or some other wild animal. It could be danger of another sort – an intruder or someone who means us harm. When the Puritans came to the New World in the 1630s, they aspired to construct a city on a hill, a beacon to the rest of the world, out of the howling wilderness of Massachusetts.

So when Jesus talks about his followers being light in the darkness, it's important to remember that total darkness is not something we often

encounter, which makes the presence of light all the more stunning and brilliant. So when Jesus invites us to let our lights shine in the darkness, we are meant to make a difference in this world, to radiate the love of God through our good works in a dark and fallen world.

The other metaphor that Jesus uses is the more familiar metaphor of salt. Salt is a mineral consisting primarily of sodium chloride. It is one of the oldest of seasonings. It has been used for centuries as a preservative, and it brings out the flavors of food. Salt was so important that it was included in the funeral offerings in Egyptian tombs, and as far back as the first millennium Before Christ, the Celts traded salt with ancient Greece and Rome for wine and other luxuries. In 1930 Mohandas Gandhi led 100,000 of his countrymen on the famous “Salt March” to harvest salt from the sea in order to avoid the British salt tax and thereby further the movement for independence.

Salt is powerful – but it is also dangerous. It is essential for life, but too much salt also threatens life. One characteristic of salt is indisputable: It provides no benefit whatsoever when it remains in the salt shaker. If we are to influence our world, Jesus says, we must be out in that world. And if the salt has lost its taste, it is worthless; it is trampled underfoot.

What I like about both of these images is that, as Jesus presents them, they summon us to moderation. A pinch of salt, not an avalanche. A candle in the darkness, not a searchlight. Jesus does not ask us to overwhelm others with our piety and our goodness. That, after all, is what the Pharisees did, always pounding their chests to call attention to how good they were, how exemplary their piety.

No, Jesus calls us simply to let our light shine and to savor the world around us.

Two powerful metaphors: light and salt. We, the followers of Jesus, are to be salt of the earth and light to the world. In neither case does the salt or the

light need to be overwhelming to be effective. A pinch of salt makes all the difference between an ordinary meal and an exquisite one. A single ray of light dispels the darkness.

Once in a while, our canoe excursions in the Boundary Waters Wilderness would coincide with a full moon. If we were fortunate to have a clear evening as well, we'd strike camp after supper, load our canoes, and paddle all night in the moonlight, gliding across the lakes. The reflected moon shimmered on the water. The only sounds were the haunting call of a loon and the drip of water from the paddle between strokes. A whole new nocturnal world opened to us in the light of the moon.

It doesn't take much light, after all, to pierce the darkness.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Christ Church
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