

“Salt and Light”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
February 9, 2020

**Matthew 5: 13-20**

Do you ever have an experience that you would describe as God shining his light on you at just the right moment? Maybe a friend gives you a call out-of-the-blue, and the laughter and memories you share together lift you up to a better place. Maybe you are struggling to get into your car what you bought at the store, and a kind stranger offers you a helping hand. Maybe, as you’re driving to work, you notice the sky is a brilliant combination of colors, and you are reminded of God’s bountiful grace amid the stresses you have been experiencing.

I have found that the more I am in tune to receiving such rays of light from God, the more I feel them shining down on me. I had one such experience the weekend before Thanksgiving. I am always open to meeting with couples who wish to get married but do not have a church home and are in need of a minister to officiate their wedding. Last year, I did this for two such couples, one being Katie and Chris, who were married on November 23. I had met with them throughout the year, and I was excited for them about the new life they would be starting together. I had never really paid attention to their last names, nor did anything unusual register with me when Chris, the groom, said he was from Canada.

The wedding was at the Columbia Club downtown on the circle, and the rehearsal was the day before on Friday. Upon my arrival, the wedding coordinator asked me, “So, were you aware of who the groom’s father is?” I said, “No, he never said anything specific about his dad.” Well, the groom’s name was Chris Goodyear. His father is Scott Goodyear, the retired IndyCar driver and former broadcaster for ABC, who did the color commentary for the Indy 500. Upon hearing this, I got a little nervous. My first thought was, “Oh boy – now I’m dealing with a celebrity wedding!” And Debbie and I had been invited to the rehearsal dinner that evening at a downtown restaurant. What had I gotten myself into?

But all of my fears and anxieties were laid to rest. The groom, Chris, was one of the most humble, gracious, and down-to-earth people I have met. And it’s clear that came from his upbringing by his parents, Scott and Leslie. They were normal people – grateful for this time of celebration, they asked for help and directions when the time was right, and Scott made the special effort to speak to me and Debbie at the rehearsal dinner – he wasn’t in a rush but genuinely showed appreciation for our presence with them. It was one of the most joyful weddings I have been fortunate to be a part of, and it was God’s light shining down on us in a way that was unexpected and surprising.

We certainly need those rays of light shining on us, don't we? At this time of the year, the dreariness of winter can remind us of the dark places of our own lives and the world in which we live. We hear of four young adults between the ages of 19-21 shot to death in an apartment on the east side of our city, and we either react with fear and trepidation, or we simply retreat into numbness with the ever-increasing repetition of such violence. We struggle with helping a family member make healthier decisions about his or her future and well-being, but that is countered with the darkness of addiction and self-indulgence. We yearn for inspiration and excitement in our career or job, but we operate in a darkness of the mundane with co-workers or superiors who are stuck in the grind. The darkness of winter can definitely accentuate the weariness we might be feeling in our daily walk of faith.

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the folks who put together the lectionary readings for today offer some hope and light to shine in the darkness of the winter doldrums. In this passage from Matthew, Jesus has just spoken the Beatitudes at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. Now, he is speaking of salt and light and his purpose in fulfilling the law. More than anything, he is offering hope to the people of God's coming kingdom, and he is empowering all his followers to be a light amid the darkness of the world, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16).

Jesus begins by saying, "You are the salt of the earth." And yet, in our modern-day world, we often hear that salt is bad, that we should avoid too much salt for the sake of our health. How can salt enrich our lives? Well, when used in appropriate amounts, salt enriches food which otherwise would be bland, giving it an appealing taste. In the same way that salt provides flavor to food, Jesus calls us to flavor the world in which we live. And, when salt loses its taste, Jesus says, "it is no longer good for anything and is thrown out" (5:13). As members of the Body of Christ, our great diversity of gifts and experiences provide ample opportunities to enrich the world with God's love. If, however, we become comfortable or indifferent about the flavor God has given us, then we lose our saltiness and purpose from God. Someone once said to me, "Salt, when added to food, can bring out the best flavors. Bland Christians just blend in and really don't make a difference."

Marcia Riggs frames this metaphor in the following way: *"You are the salt of the earth," suggests that Jesus gives them as his disciples a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth. Like salt, which is used to alter or enhance the tastes of food, the disciples' capacity to elicit goodness as they participate on the earth should be of profound consequence. The danger for disciples is that they may lose that capacity by forgetting that they are to disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, and courageously standing for what they believe. Disciples who do not engage in such practices that humanize life on earth will*

*be like salt that has lost its taste* (*Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 284-286).

Jesus follows his analogy of salt with one of light: “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 a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (5:14-15). This analogy is straightforward: the purpose of light is to illumine the darkness, so that all might see. We don’t have nightlights in our rooms all covered-up; that would defeat the purpose of having a light on in the first place. Light offers clarity, vision, and calm in places that would usually be filled with uncertainty, blindness, and fear.

“You are the light of the world.” Jesus is speaking these words not only to the masses gathered on a hillside in Galilee, but also to his newly appointed disciples. For me, it’s as if he’s saying to them, “Look, the light I’m giving you is not something that you just keep to yourself. It’s something which is for the entire world. Don’t forget that, because it’s through your good works that God is working, and you will give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Or consider how Archbishop William Temple puts it: “The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” How does that sit with you? Kind of unsettling, isn’t it? The church can’t exist without its members, can it? I mean, we have to have members to serve as leaders, to financially support the organization and its operation, to provide for fellowship and study and organize its activities. Isn’t that why we exist – to keep things afloat and secure for those who have said that John Knox Presbyterian Church is their church home?

“The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” The light we are to shine before others is not a light for us within these walls. The light we are to shine is for all the world, for those who are not our members. When we focus too much on ourselves, we are hiding under a bushel basket. When we become exceedingly internally focused, then we have become bland like salt that has lost its taste.

How do we keep a proper focus – as individuals and as the church – so that our light shines before others? One way I believe we keep a proper focus is by remembering our call to be hospitable in our faith. A lot of times, we will say it is important as Christians to extend hospitality to others. But we may not realize that such actions are more than just saying hello to a stranger, or by holding a reception for guests we hope will attend. To extend hospitality is integral and central to our faith, and it is far from an easy or safe thing to do.

Michael Kelley shares this about Christian hospitality: *Hospitality was vitally important to the spread of the gospel in the days when the church was just beginning to flourish because when traveling to a new area, people were at the mercy of the people who lived in that city. Christians took hospitality seriously, and because they did, the gospel was able to take root . . .*

*From a purely pragmatic perspective, the early church had to practice hospitality in order for the gospel to continue to move throughout the world*

*and for the church to grow. But there's also a deeper reason why hospitality is so vital – that's because practicing hospitality is one of the simplest and most tangible ways we model the truth of the gospel.*

*But times have changed. Despite the fact that much of our lives is lived in a “public” way online, most people value privacy more than they did in the past. Though we might put forth a version of ourselves through social media, we still really like our personal space, personal thought, and personal time. The very nature of hospitality runs counter to this. Hospitality is sharing what we consider to be “personal” with each other in a sacrificial way . . . The word hospitality comes from the combination of two words: “love” and “stranger.” Literally, then, hospitality is the love of strangers.*

*This is a powerful description of what the gospel is. When we were strangers and aliens, God took us in. When we were without a home and family, God brought us into His. When we were without hope in the world, God adopted us as His children. In the ultimate act of hospitality, God provided a way to welcome us through the death of Jesus Christ. God is ultimately hospitable, and therefore hospitality is a characteristic built into the spiritual DNA of all those who have experienced this divine hospitality . . .*

*Exercising hospitality will cost us something. It will cost us time, energy, resources, privacy – all kinds of things. Any time there is a personal cost, the temptation for us is to focus on what we are giving up in order to welcome someone else in. When we make ourselves willing to be used by God in order to practice hospitality, we are testifying that we believe God to be our great provider.*

*Hospitality requires us to share with others, and if we are going to share with others, it means that we will have to do with less ourselves. We will have less personal time, less personal space, less personal comfort. But when we choose this posture of hospitality, we are testifying about our personal contentment. Having less is fine, because we know that when we have Jesus, we truly already have more than enough (<http://michaelkelley.co/2018/08/3-aspects-of-our-faith-hospitality-puts-on-display/>).*

*How are we called to be the salt of the earth? How are we called to be God's light to this world? How have others shown us hospitality in a way that strengthens our faith? How might we extend such hospitality to others – to love the stranger – so that the gospel might be fully known in this world?*

*“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Let it be so, today, tomorrow, and all our days. Amen.*