

“Salty Christians” Matthew 5:1-2, 13-17

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston WV 5th Sunday after Epiphany [February 9,] 2014

^{5:1} Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Last week we began this “Jesus on the Mountain” series – in which Jesus lays out for those who were willing to climb, a new way of living. The beatitudes are not only a good description of what KINGDOM LIVING looks like, but also a good yardstick by which we can measure our growth.

Last Sunday we observed that excited worship (like singing with gusto about a groundhog) is NOT what Kingdom living is all about. Rather, it’s about living a life that looks different. The Sermon on the Mount showed people then, and perhaps even more so today, that to be a follower of Jesus is NOT FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM- that is where we say we believe, but our lives don’t show any difference than do the lives of atheists.

Today, Jesus continues His mountain teaching:

1. PAY ATTENTION, PLEASE. I’m not changing the law of the First Testament here. I’m showing you how it is fulfilled.

Fulfilled, like how our call to worship reflected the teaching of Isaiah. Fulfilled, like how First Testament prophet Micah summarized it:

**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)**

Later, Jesus Himself would summarize that law contained in the First Testament as two sides of the same coin:

22:37b “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

2. He says that when we fulfill that Law, our lives will be like SALT and LIGHT.

Salt is spicy, but many of us today are told to cut back on it, because it gives us high blood pressure. And I would be one who would advocate that worship on Sunday morning also needs to be a little bit spicy – I hope that the traditional worship style here at Saint Marks is never bland or boring, and I hope that sometimes it does get your blood pressure to rise a little bit.

But, that sort of spicy was not so well recognized by first century Palestinians who were listening to Jesus.

Jesus audience knew about their usage of salt that we don't know today.

Boys in first century Palestinian peasant communities would be taught their father's trade. Girls, who were not expected to take up trades, had different family and communal functions. Part of their daily chores was to go out and about and collect dung that would be deposited by camels, donkeys, and other animals. (It is a custom followed by girls in many third world countries today. We have seen this in Heiffer Project video tapes in VBS.) The donkey dung would be used as fuel in communal clay ovens, where the bread would be baked.

However, the donkey dung would not incinerate without the addition of a chemical catalyst.

You're getting ahead of me, aren't you? Yes, the donkey dung fuel patties required the insertion of SALT in order to ignite and burn.

People in Jesus' day understood His teaching about SALT differently than do we. SALT is what you put into the dung in life, in order to make a difference.

If we live as CHRISTIANS, and not as FUNCTIONAL ATHEISTS, then we will be getting involved in the [pardon me] DUNG-Y LIFE SITUATIONS and making a difference.

Sometimes we send money. (Last week, you saved 54 children's lives in IMAGINE NO MALARIA contributions. We've got 3 Sundays left to save 446 more – to move them in from DEATH ROW to the SANCTUARY OF LIFE.)

But there are other CHRISTIANS here at Saint Marks who personally risk getting into the dark and dirty, stained and difficult places of people's lives, in order to make a difference. There are those who work in Hope's Closet in order to give DIGNITY and HOPE to people who have made bad life choices and who are trying to escape the slavery of the bottle and drugs.

There are people here who risk rubbing elbows with folks whose lives are different, on Friday nights, at Worship Lite and at Movie Night – just to show the love of Jesus. There are some CHRISTIANS here at Saint Marks who intentionally placed their health delivery practices in poor counties outside Kanawha County, in order that poor folks can be served – even though it costs them 10s of thousands of dollars of income every single year.

That's SALT.

That's what Jesus is talking about – MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

3. And Jesus used the Metaphor of LIGHT, as well.

If you are not a FUNCTIONAL ATHEIST, if you are really a CHRISTIAN, then it will show.

You don't have to tell people; they will know from the light that shines in your life.

I have to confess ... and I know I get in trouble with the PREACHER'S UNION whenever I confess stuff from the pulpit. But, I have to confess that I DON'T ALWAYS THINK HOLY THOUGHTS. [pause for laugh?]

I confess that when I encounter people who feel some need to tell me how good they are, and how much good they have done, that the thought that runs through my mind is something like this: IS YOUR LIGHT SO DIM THAT YOU HAVE TO TELL ME IT'S TURNED ON. DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR GOOD DEEDS. IF THE LIGHT IS SHINING, I WILL KNOW.

People, through whom the light of Christ shines, don't have to tell other people what they do. It shows – in ALL that they do.

You can't put it under a bushel and then pull it out.

JESUS IS NOT ON A LIGHT SWITCH.

4. I can't help myself; when I read this familiar scripture again, about Salt and Light, I kept flashing back to memories of Summer evenings ...(YES, MY BELOVED, SUMMER **WILL** COME AGAIN, I PROMISE!) ... Summer evenings spent in the front yard of my grandparents' house, while they sat on the front porch watching me.

My grandfather told me (and there's some information about this on the tear off tab in your bulletin from the 2009 Farmer's Almanac) that I could catch a bird, if I just put salt on its tail.

So, there I would be tiptoeing about in the front yard, with my salt shaker in hand, trying to do what he told me. I kept missing. (I remember, as I got older I wondered why, as a child, I didn't get one of those 10 pound bags of snow removal salt and throw it from a distance on the bird; that would get it for sure!)

There are some things in life that I simply don't have the wherewithal to change. I'm not in a position to make a difference. (Read Psalm 131!)

Some people want Christian SALT and LIGHT to be like hurling 10 pound salt bags on little birds ... they want Christians to be able to force everyone to do things THEIR way.

But Jesus is talking about SALT and LIGHT (and later he would emphasize my point here by talking about YEAST and MUSTARD SEEDS) in terms of little, everyday ways of empowerment – not overpowering. **It's like my grandfather's "salt on the tail" tale: If you're close enough to put salt on the bird's tail, you're close enough to catch the bird; we (you and I) have got to get up close and personal in order to make a difference in people lives.**

If you get to be President of the United States, or Governor, or Head of the Department of Public Health, you are in a different position – and you can do different things-maybe bigger things. (Parenthetically, I would note that SPEAKING THE TRUTH is one VERY IMPORTANT WAY TO SPREAD KINGDOM LIGHT, regardless of your position. TELLING THE TRUTH really does help build trust. (end of parenthetical note.))

But most of us are not in those high falutin' positions. Nonetheless we can still be AMBASSADORS OF THE KINGDOM.

We put a little package of salt into each bulletin today, for you to peel off, and put in your pocket – as a reminder.

When you hear someone tell a racial joke, SPREAD SOME SALT. You don't have to scold them; but don't laugh. Someone this week, who stopped by the office and helped us tape these salt packages to the bulletins, told Lynn and me about a way to deal with racial jokes: just stare blankly at the person once they have told the punch line.

When you encounter someone who is having a really hard time, SPREAD SOME SALT. Don't think that you have to SOLVE their problem; but you can take time to listen to them.

Little things that we do each day can be CATALYST for the kingdom. You let JESUS' LIGHT shine through you. EVERY DAY. EVERY day. At the risk of being repetitive: **There is no ON/OFF switch to Jesus' light.**

Was there a time this past week when you could have been salt or light, and you were too busy; or, perhaps, too uncomfortable to get involved?

Confession is good. Then Repent/Turn around.

Take your salt. **Remember** your salt. **Use** your salt.

Take your salt. Use your salt. (I throw salt bags out into the congregation from the pulpit.)

SPREAD SOME SALT. There's always plenty more where this came from. It's not YOUR salt. It's not YOUR light.

It comes from Jesus. And there's always plenty more where this came from. (Throw one more handful of salt bags from the pulpit into the congregation.)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.