

SALT AND LIGHT

[Jesus said] “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.

Matthew 5:13-16

Do you remember a little car that was around for a while in the 1970s—the AMC Pacer. It was low to the ground, about as wide as it was tall. It was a basic, unassuming, but unfortunately unreliable, car. In some ways it reminds me of the people I grew up around in the little farm towns of Texas and Oklahoma where my father was a pastor. In some ways they were like that Pacer. Kind of low to the ground and about as wide as they were tall. Unassuming and unpretentious. But with one exception—they were remarkably reliable people. They didn’t have much, but if you needed anything, they were always there to help. They were what we call “salt of the earth” kind of people. And I’ll bet you knew, and still know, people like that—generous, humble, and grounded.

And there is something about that groundedness that captures what Jesus is getting at when he calls his disciples the salt of the earth. Salt is a common, basic, and yet indispensable element. It is part of the earth and at the same time it is distinct. It serves as a subtle seasoning. A good cook knows that just enough salt in the broth will bring out the full flavor of the other ingredients. Too much and the salt overwhelms the other ingredients; too little and the true flavors of the carrots and onions and herbs do not shine in their fullest. Salt serves its purpose best when it is hidden and does not draw attention to itself, when it seasons and brings out the best in the whole pot.

But Jesus doesn’t stop with the salt image. He follows up with, “you are the light of the world.”

Salt is effective when it is a hidden, subtle seasoning. Light, on the other hand, is only effective when it is visible. And Jesus warns against hiding your light under a bushel basket. A life of discipleship, he says, is *not* hidden, secret, or private. It shines publicly, before others, with the express purpose of reflecting the light of God through your visible actions.

So when it comes to living out our faith, which is it—subtle and hidden, or shining and visible? Is Jesus talking out of both sides of his mouth here? Or is this a multiple choice quiz, and we get to choose one or the other? If not, how can we be both hidden salt and public light?

This is the dilemma many of us face when it comes to our own life of discipleship. We struggle with how to be both salt and light. For the most part, we are more comfortable with being the hidden, subtle salt of the earth; certainly not ashamed of our faith, maybe even well-grounded in our faith, but choosing to living it out quietly and privately, in our daily lives and in our lifestyle. And we balk at this second call to be a light in the world or to the world, and especially at the suggestion that this might involve speaking openly and publicly about our faith. We take the words of St. Francis as our motto: “Preach the gospel; use words if necessary.”

Sometimes I think we are reluctant to speak openly about our faith because the religious vocabulary we were raised with sounds out of place in the ordinary situations of life we find ourselves in outside of a church setting. We balk at the kind of language that is often associated with evangelism and personal witnessing—talk of being “saved,” or accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. What we consider biblical and theological language is not a part of our everyday vocabulary—words like sin and redemption and justification.

And at the same time, we find it hard to put into ordinary language our own faith experience: how we have been caught up in this magnificent story of God’s love and grace, how our own life story has been shaped by that larger story, how we have experienced forgiveness and have been held together when it seemed like our world and life was breaking apart, how we have hope and peace even in times of anxiety and doubt, how we have been comforted in our deepest grief. All those things are like pinches of salt that season our lives, and by extension season the world. So how do we combine that saltiness with being a light that is not hidden, but shines in such a way that those who see it see through it to the God who is the source of our faith and hope and peace? That, I think, is the issue that most of us in the mainline church face.

Tom Long has addressed this very dilemma in a book published a few years ago called *Testimony*. The sub-title is: *Talking ourselves into being Christian*. Although he doesn’t directly discuss this particular set of salt and light images, what he sets out to do in this book really captures those salt and light facets of discipleship that Jesus is talking about here, not only quietly living out our faith in our own lives and in the world, but also speaking the truth about our lives in such a way that it points to the source of our faith.

Where Long’s book really excels is in demonstrating how “authentic God talk does not always depend on the use of explicitly religious words” and “how Christians talk about God and faith when we are not in church.” He suggests that “that talking about God does not mean sounding like the ‘Church Lady’ on *Saturday Night Live* but instead means talking like strong, loving, and wise human beings.”

And we can take as our model here the way Jesus himself spoke about faith. If you read the gospels what you hear is talk of farming and planting and herding livestock—salt of the earth kind of experiences. You hear him talking about family matters, about parents and children, about weddings and funerals. You hear him talk about the stuff of daily life—preparing bread dough, lighting lamps, spreading a table. And so Tom Long makes the leap and says that like the speech of Jesus “our faithful talk will be about work and play, parents and children, feasting and fasting, faith and doubt, sickness and health, cruelty and kindness, war and peace, being born and growing old, living and dying.”

Long is not advocating for a renewal of God-talk the way we may have heard it in the past—the preachy, conversion-oriented, evangelism that we shy away from. Instead, he says that “the goal is to use [ordinary, everyday] words as God intends, to learn how to speak in a fully human manner. . . . We have an almost infinite capacity to use words for good or ill, but Christians believe that we are truly human only when we use words like Jesus used them: to bless and not to curse, to build up and not to tear down, to point to the mystery of God pervading all of life and not to refer only, always, incessantly to ourselves.” (*Testimony*, pp. 19-20)

And I think we have not only an opportunity but a pressing need to use our words to build up and bless and bring together people who, no matter how the election turns out, will remain polarized and angry and jaded and distrustful. Maybe even more in the aftermath of the election, we need to utilize both our saltiness and our light. Not shying away from the language

of truth and justice that can sometimes shine a harsh light on the brokenness of our nation, but speaking in such a way that our words are grounded in the everyday experiences of our lives that we share with our neighbors: experiences of struggle and conflict, but also experiences of grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. Letting the light of Christ's love and mercy shine through our salt-of-the-earth language and behaviors, bringing out the best flavors of our communities and nation.

There are, of course, many ways of being both salt and light in the world. But I think of a movement that David Brooks has been part of for several years now called Weave: The Social Fabric Project. It is not a political movement; it is not overtly religious or spiritual. As Brooks describes it, the Weaver movement is about "repairing our country's social fabric, which is badly frayed by distrust, division and exclusion. People are quietly working across America to end loneliness and isolation and weave inclusive communities, [working to] shift our culture from hyper-individualism that is all about personal success, to relationalism that puts relationships at the center of our lives."

The movement does not follow a political agenda, or really any agenda at all. Rather it encourages and supports those who are already working at building social connections at all levels of community, but especially in neighborhoods. It is as simple as getting to know the people who live on your block; organizing your neighbors in Christmas caroling or cleaning up the local park. It is as profound as the commitment of Asiaha Butler, who decided against leaving the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago for the safer suburbs. Instead, she and her husband Antoine invested themselves in the local neighborhood literally by buying a vacant lot filled with broken glass and aimless kids for \$1 and turning it into a grassy lawn for community events. Building on the strengths and positive attitude of enough neighbors, they have turned their community, known for crime and gun violence, into a place where residents take pride in their community and work together to make it a model for other neighborhoods. (See more at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/>)

Maybe the challenges we face are not as daunting as a south Chicago community, but no matter where you live there is a place and a crying need for this kind of salt and light. So let your light shine before others. Not that they may see you and your good works and praise you, but that they may see through your good works, your salt-of-the-earth life, your ordinary, everyday language, and acknowledge the source and goal of our faith—the God whose goodness is reflected in our life of discipleship.

May it be so.