

“BLESSED ARE THE SMALL AND FRAGILE”

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
The First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Last week we took a fresh approach to the Beatitudes. Like the rest of the Bible, the Beatitudes are more about God than about us. They aren't rules or ideals we aspire to. They give glimpses of how God sees us. They invite us to see similarly. In the Beatitudes we learn to see as God sees before we go out and do anything.

This salt and light part of the Sermon on the Mount is about our going and doing. Jesus makes a telling statement about God's claim on our lives as his disciples. He assigns and commissions us back out into the world he gathers us from. Jesus gives us images providing clear clues on what terms to engage the world. You are the salt of the earth, Jesus declares. And you are the light of the world.

Notice Jesus doesn't say you ought to be the salt of the earth. You must attempt to be like light to the world. No "must" or "should". You *are* salt and light, he says. I like that because Christianity gets drearily typecast as being about rule-keeping when it is actually about living faithfully in the embrace of the true and living God. I also like it because, quite frankly, you are the salt of the earth. Small as it is, salt accentuates the sweetness any food, even a grapefruit. A little salt can make an amazing difference in how things taste, as any salt-free dieter will readily tell you.

And light? Just think how little light we have at the end of our Tenebrae service, when I read the gospel by a candle. One tiny light is enough for us all to see by. And then I snuff it symbolizing the crucifixion and it feels like all of life has ended.

I like Jesus calling us salt and light, quite frankly, because you don't always notice the difference you make in the light you bring to others. Salt and light are small, fragile, and when they do their jobs, they are mostly go unnoticed. Jesus loved understated imagery for God's work, such as in saying God's reign is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows into a large bush birds nest in.

Accordingly, as you arrive at work, at school, or to serve, you don't brandish a gold chariot with the word "Christian" prominently emblazoned on the side. No, you slip in, keep your head down, do your job, and maybe do a bit extra, that no one notices or appreciates. You look like everyone else. But there is a difference.

From the moment you stuck up for the problem child everyone else gave up on, told your boss not to compromise with the essentials and to do the right thing, told the struggling friend going through a tough time in her marriage you would be there for her and that you had time or resources you wished to devote to her--that was the moment when you became salt or light. Yes, they're small and slight often to the point of being invisible. But when they are absent everyone can tell.

As you brought Christ's presence to others, without drawing a lot of attention to yourself—and that is generally how you serve God by doing good—you became that substance which made the world more savory just as the world became dull and tasteless, maybe even not worth living. You became light shining in the dark.

Someone said the only Bible most people will ever read is the lives of Christians, people like you and me. Do you see by commissioning us to work not by drawing attention to ourselves, but letting the glory reflect on God, how much trust Jesus places in our likes? You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.

Frankly, I am proud of who you are, all of the turkeys at Thanksgiving and the hams at Christmas; all of the food and cash you gave last weekend for the Soup-or-Bowl offering, delivered by our confirmands, by the way; all of the outreach through Person-to-Person or building homes with poor in far-off places, all of the meals served monthly in Norwalk, all of the unknown good you do anonymously.

Jesus didn't say, "I am the salt of the earth or I am the light of the world." He was the Great Delegator. He knew they'd nail him for a subversive message. He had no choice but to lay this charge on us before they got to him. He trusted ordinary and unspectacular folk like us to do extraordinary and spectacular things. You *are* light, he said. You *are* salt. He didn't say you're a shining imperial army, off to conquer. Or you're a loud-speaker blaring from a car-top, drowning out all sound.

We sometimes think we can never truly make an impact. That's just not true. The scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin noted, "A presence is never mute." All of us constantly send messages about what matters and what doesn't, about who matters and who doesn't. Our lives forever suggest something or someone beyond us. It is not a matter of 'if', but a matter of who you might point to beyond yourself and what message you care to send. None of that was lost upon Jesus.

These images of salt and light matter more living now in this modern secular era. I was born in the 50s, when it still felt like the church was calling the shots, or at least our faith would be consulted before major decisions. That era I was born into, stretching way back to gathering our church and calling a pastor in 1727 so Darien could exist; stretching back to Constantine in 313 AD making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, probably ended sometime in the 1960s. It may be the most important historical shift in our lifetime. We never talk about it. Today America and the world are done doing us favors. Nobody blinks anymore to schedule team practice time as we worship and this will not change back soon.

But Jesus did pretty well without the sanction of the world's powers and principalities. Could you imagine Paul the Apostle petitioning the Roman Senate to subsidize the cost of his missionary journeys and then giving up when they refused? Today's reality has reverted to that era, so far as relations of church and world.

But the small, humble images like salt and light still give this world flavor and still show the way. We can't expect the world to change and put us back in charge. We're the ones who must change. As we continue to think as big God's reign, we must learn to be happy starting in small ways, in obscure places, with no fanfare.

Let me give an example. Somewhere I heard the story of Mother Teresa flying to Mexico City with Robert McCauley of Americares. Yes, the same Americares as down the railroad tracks. As box dinners were distributed on that flight, Mother Teresa asked how much the airline would devote to her home in Calcutta if she returned her dinner. After learning how much that was, she invited everyone on board, including the crew, to return dinners to assist the lepers in India's gutters.

When the plane landed, Mother Teresa asked the crew if she could have the dinners—you know, the actual food itself—to offer to the poor and hungry of Mexico. Then, when the airline provided her the dinners, she asked if she might borrow their trucks to deliver the food. Are you getting the general drift of how salt tastes and how light can radiate? "We don't break any laws," McCauley wryly observed, "but we do bend a lot of rules. And we never, ever give in." Salt and light at work!

I close with this testimony, about 1,700 years old. It speaks to the early church's salt and light. It is wonderful to recall on a Sunday we baptize a new generation.

"Christians can't be distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. They do not separate themselves into cities of their own. Their doctrine, unlike many religious movements, is not based on human ideas or philosophy. Although they live in Greek and barbarian cities, depending on their place of birth, and follow the usual customs of those cities, they never cease to witness to the reality of another City within which they live. They share in everything as citizens, yet endure everything as aliens. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not expose their unwanted children to the elements. They share their board with each other, but not their married beds."

"They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the laws of the land but in their own lives go far beyond the law's requirements. They love all people and by all people are persecuted. They are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and all the while they enjoy utter abundance. They are dishonored, and in their dishonor are glorified; they are reviled and yet they bless. They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them will find it impossible to justify their hatred. To put it simply: what the soul is in the body that Christians also are in the world." Amen.