

### **Where is the Light?**

How can the church of Jesus Christ live faithfully in today's world? Jesus tells us we are "salt" and "light" for the world, but what does that look like?

Or in the case of salt, what does that taste like?

Can you conjure up the taste of salt in your mouth? Not too much salt, just the right amount to make everything taste better? There's nothing like a pinch of salt to draw out the full flavor of food. Even water needs its salts to taste right. So what is the comparison Jesus is making, in these words which come right on the heels of the Beatitudes? I think he's telling his disciples that as God makes the world more like the kingdom of heaven, we are essential in this recipe. We are here to elicit goodness in the form of justice and righteousness, mercy, and peace. To make the world taste better.

And if we are also the light of the world, we are here to make the world look better, and help others to see better the eternal truth of God's way. It's a little confusing to read in John's gospel that Jesus says of himself, "I am the light of the world," and then to read in Matthew's gospel that he tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world." Which is it? Consider this: We are the light because Christ, the light of God, is in us. That explains why all the credit for the good we do belongs to God.

But how do we live as salt and light in this crazy world? It seems harder and harder each year, as we try to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ in a hyper-connected world. Most of us are bombarded daily with many more messages, images, news, and ideas than we can take in, so we filter and ignore and choose what we will allow to penetrate our awareness. On a United Airlines flight last week, I was settling into my seat when the flight attendant took his place in the aisle holding a model seat belt and oxygen mask. The safety video began on the screen right in front of my face. Time to tune out, right? I admit, I was paying very little attention until I realized that the video had a sense of humor. Exit doors and emergency lighting were demonstrated at an outdoor wedding in Hawaii. Oxygen masks were used by a family atop the Sears Tower in Chicago. Then we were transported to a castle in Scotland, where inflating a life vest morphed into a Scotsman blowing into his bagpipes. The no smoking rule was described at a smoky Chinese New Year's Festival. The most bizarre scene came at Machu Pichu when a talking llama gave us the rules for electronic devices, while a small crowd of young people put their tablets and laptops in their backpacks and then took selfies in front of the ancient buildings. The video concluded with its entire cast on stage in Hollywood, as if for an Academy Award presentation.

Is this the only way to get people's attention these days? With gimmicks? Yes, it was creative, but each time they update, the bar is set a little higher. It's like the Super Bowl ads—what will they be this year? We like entertainment. We don't want to be bored. And we don't want to be boring. Hey, our church just launched a new website. It's attractive. It's platform-responsive, meaning it looks good on your desktop, your laptop, your mobile device—whatever. It's inviting and pithy, not loaded with words nor stock photos, but real pictures of the real people who are First Presbyterian Church.

But will it go beyond catching people's eye to keeping their attention? To compare it to the airline safety video, will people remember the important message when their life is in danger, or will

they only remember the talking llama? Will they look beyond the friendly faces on the screen to see the joy of a community of faith in Jesus Christ?

That, my friends, is the challenge of being salt and light in our world today.

We face serious issues in our world. Jesus tells his disciples that we are to live in THIS world, following his commandments, fulfilling the law and listening to the prophets. Sometimes the Christian message emphasizes the grace of God so much that we excuse our failings and relax into the comfort of Christ's promise of eternal life. But Matthew's gospel gives us Jesus' corrective to this cheap understanding of grace. We live in THIS world, with responsibilities for taking care of it, and under the commandment to ALWAYS love God with ALL our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We live in THIS world, under the commandment to love ALL our neighbors as ourselves. We live in THIS world, where the disruptive, upside-down values of the kingdom of heaven are our guideposts.

So we listen again to the words with which Jesus began this sermon on the mount. If we find ourselves too distant from the poor in spirit, we will find ourselves living outside the realm of heaven. If we trample on the meek and exploit the vulnerable, we won't inherit the earth. If we abandon mercy and call compassion naive, we'll not receive mercy ourselves. And if cynicism and despair cause us to give up our hunger for righteousness, neither we nor the world God loves will ever be satisfied. We are salt for the earth. We are light for the world. We must do BETTER than conventional expressions of piety. We must do MORE than take care of our own relationship with God. We can't separate our personal from our public lives, our faith from our politics, or our discipleship from our daily decisions. It's all one. We manifest Christ's light as we live as his people in THIS world.

That doesn't mean it's always easy. Pastor Christine Chakoian contrasts the values of this world, which would have us as the church pursue buildings, budgets, membership numbers, and influence, with the values of God's kingdom, and she writes,

Our effectiveness as disciples does not depend on our success according to the world's standards. Moreover, if we are working only to have the most prominent, well-attended, powerful congregation, then we are working towards the wrong goal. The point is not to give glory to ourselves, but to give glory to God. Doing that requires nothing more than the humility of being who we really are: salt and light.

(2013, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, vol 1, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 85)

And sometimes God shows us how easy that can be. Two weeks ago, early in the morning, six of us Presbyterians joined about 40 other area Christians on a bus bound for Helena. Most of us were beginners at the task of letting our shared Christian values guide us as citizen advocates. Several other busloads came from other cities in Montana, so that by the time we were in the Capitol rotunda, there were about 200 of us. Our goal was to talk with legislators on their lunch hour about issues of concern, all related to Jesus' concern for those he calls in Matthew 25, "the least of these, my brothers and sisters."

But as I indicated, most of us were beginners at this. So on the bus, we had some training regarding proposed legislation which would affect children and families, those being released from prison, immigrants and refugees, and those affected by the death penalty. For each item of proposed legislation, we heard a biblical basis and theological grounding for the stance advocated by the Montana Association of Christians. Love, justice, mercy, compassion—these were the guiding principles.

I'm not sure how many legislators we actually talked to that day, how many minds might have been changed or hearts moved or votes switched. But on the bus, something powerful did happen. Our bus driver was a young man, in his mid-twenties. Apparently he was listening to our training. Because when the bus stopped, he engaged first, the delegation's organizer, and later, anyone who wanted to hear his story. He told us that when he received his work assignment and learned he would be driving a busload of CHRISTIANS, he was not happy. He expected to be an outsider, that we would not be a fun group to spend a day with. He expected a stereotype of self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and exclusion. But listening to our training, he heard words of love, justice, mercy, and compassion, and he observed among us kindness, laughter, and caring. This was not the sort of Christianity he had experienced when he was in high school when, as he told it, he was lured into a youth group with talk of love but then once there, heard only a message of fire and brimstone. He was exuberant to discover that Christians cared about the same things he cared about. He remembered a story about his grandmother, that she was an Episcopalian, and she worked for civil rights. His grandmother, he decided, would have fit into this busload of happy people. We told him that we were just a few of the many from our diverse congregations, all of which would welcome him to join our fellowships.

That was a day of living as salt and light for the world. No gimmicks needed. Just our genuine humble selves, letting our light shine in the world.

May our lives elicit God's sumptuous flavors, and illumine God's glorious dream, for all the world and all its inhabitants. Jesus is the light of the world! Let his light shine in you!

