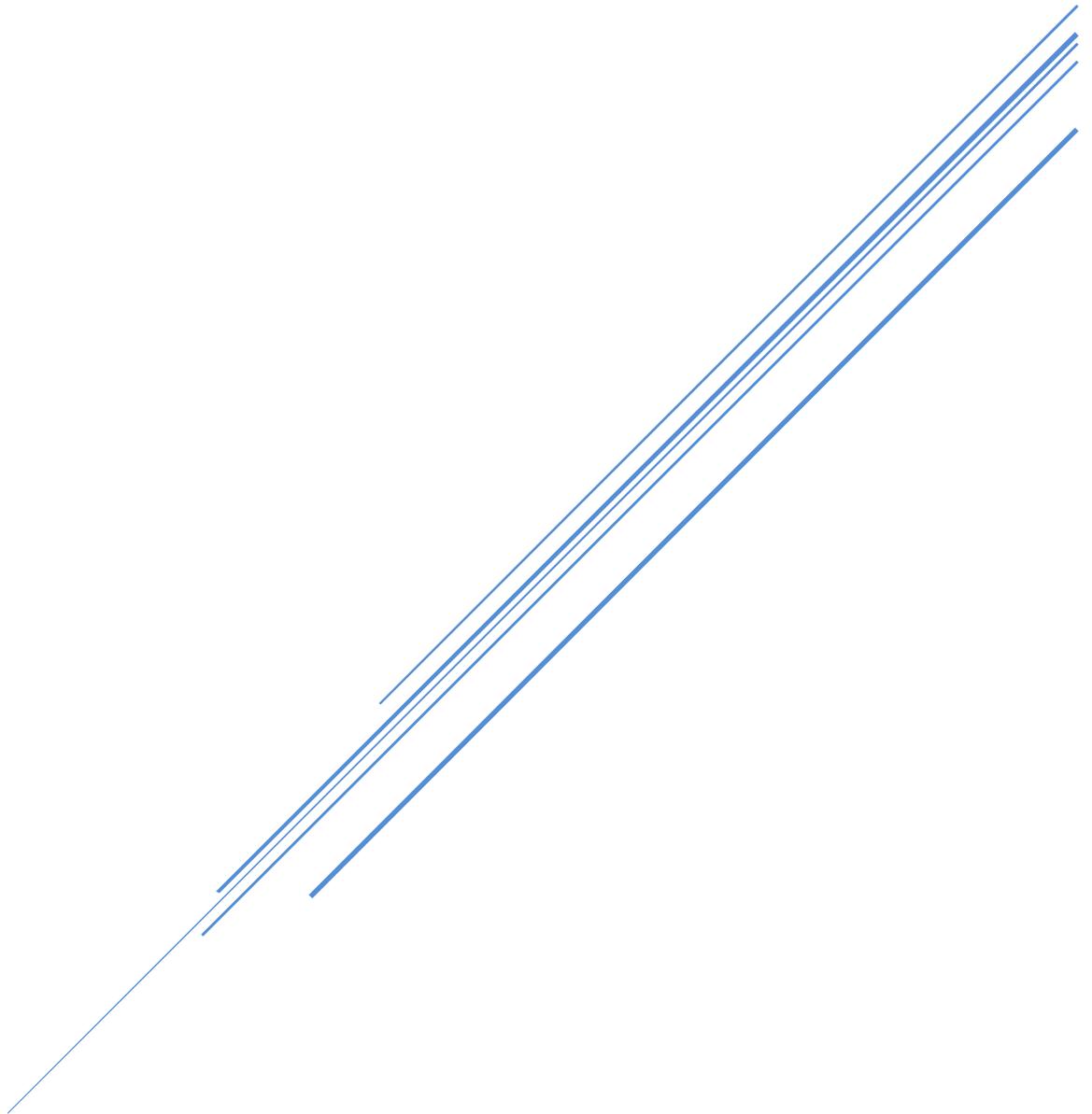


# “SOMETIMES I NEED A REMINDER”

Matthew 5:13-20



February 9, 2014

She's the salt of the earth....

My mom used to say that about certain people –a choir friend who brought food to another sick friend, or the person who volunteers at extended table month after month, or the guy who helps finish the shoveling.

Salt has been a special element on our planet for thousands of years. Even today we use it to add flavor to almost everything we eat. So much so that it's become a bad word almost! Now I do pretty well – I don't add salt to anything except eggs and potatoes. And some soups. Those low sodium soups really need salt! My dad puts salt on everything before he even tastes it!

Salt in the ancient world was one of the most common preservatives. It kept food from going bad. The Egyptians used it in the preservation of the dead. At banquets, a distinction was made between those who sat above the salt and those who sat below it. Orthodox churches still use salt in the baptism, pouring a little on the wet baby and saying, "May you be preserved for eternal life." Salt was so valuable it was used as currency in ancient times and we get our word 'salary' from the word for salt.

1<sup>st</sup> century Greek historian Plutarch said that meat is dead and left on its own it will go rotten. Since salt preserves it, salt is like a new soul inserted into a dead body. So that's a little weird but I think we can see the comparison – salt preserves from corruption. Christians are to have a certain antiseptic influence on life. We need to be the kind of person that defeats corruption and by our very presence makes it easier for others to be good.

More than as a preservative, though, the most obvious characteristic of salt is that salt adds flavor to things. Admit it: Food without salt is terrible – bland, boring, flat, *yuck!*

And like salt, Christianity is supposed to add flavor to life! So what happened? How come people tend to connect Christianity with just the opposite?

One English poet wrote, "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath." So where's the kick? Where's the spice – the flavor? And can salt really lose its flavor? All that I've read says no. Salt doesn't lose its flavor, so what is Jesus talking about? I had an economics professor who said that money in a savings account isn't worth anything. In order for money to have value it has to be spent. I think the same is true of salt – the only salt that has no flavor is the salt that's still in the shaker.

Light – You are the light of the world. Wait a minute – didn't Jesus teach that He was the light of the world? Yes, he did, and what a compliment this was to the crowd that day. Oppressed and poor, no doubt few, if any, people in Jesus' audience that day felt like the light of the world!

So what did Jesus mean, exactly? First of all, a light is meant to be seen. I always think of the homes in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine as looking like the Flinstones' house, you know? All stone with a tiny little round window... they were dark. The lamp was usually a clay gravy boat filled with oil that the wick just kind of floated around in. without matches it would hard to re-light. When they left the house they would intentionally put their lamp under a bushel for safety's sake. Otherwise the lamp would sit on a lamp stand so everyone could see it. Christianity is like that. And not just in the church – but out there in the real world. They will know we are Christians by our love, right? People will see it in us – we don't have to announce it.

Light is also a guide. Think of airports and light houses, streetlights and neon signs. I always think of the old Motel 6 commercial – "We'll leave the light on for you." A candle in the window has been a tradition since colonial times or even earlier in some cultures. A Candle in the Window was used to signal a family's loyalty to a loved one who was

away at war or traveling. It let that person know the family was still waiting for them to come home. In Ireland during times of religious persecution, the Window Candle signaled the location of religious services.

In this way a Christian must be an example to others. It's hard to be the only person to stand up for the right thing. I tell the youth all the time that they need to be the one person who stands up to bullies. It's the same for grown-ups, you know. It's one of the things this world needs most – people to stand up and be good. If there's a group of people and a suggestion is made that something questionable should be done, somebody needs to stand up and say something. If one person says “I won't be party to that,” that makes it easier for someone else to stand up.

So what is Jesus saying to us? So here we are in the second week of the Beatitudes: Jesus' masterpiece and quite possibly the whole of Christianity in a nutshell. The Condensed reader's digest version of how to be a Christ follower...

You may recall that in my very first sermon on the beatitudes I talked about there being no verb in the first 8 statements. In the original Aramaic, the phrase is very closely related to an old Hebrew colloquialism – “Blessed are the poor in spirit” becomes “Oh the blessedness of the poor in spirit.” Oy!, the blessedness! Oh, the blessedness of the meek! Oh, the blessedness of the poor in spirit! Jesus is describing the upside down world of the Kingdom of God which -- I might add -- is at hand.

It's kind of like a new list of commandments, except that they're not commands, are they? There are no “Do's or Don'ts” —No “Thou shalt not's” ... It's pretty easy to see why some scholars suggest a parallel between Moses' law from Mount Sinai, and Jesus' radical new law – also given on a 'mount' by the Sea of Galilee. But it isn't really a law....

it's more of an observation of the life of those who have, by Grace, gone beyond the law.

You know what I think Jesus is doing? He's reminding the people of something they forgot – or never knew...

Lately there have been literally hundreds of books and articles written on the demographic that we in the religion business call "nones." N-o-n-e, none, not n-u-n. These are the people that when it comes time to pick a religious affiliation, they check the box marked "none." The ones who are "spiritual but not religious." I found a good one recently, that rather than talk about all the reasons that church is no longer relevant to the younger generations, instead talks about why we should go to church.

In many people's minds, all the church used to provide can now be found everywhere else – community outreach, soup kitchens, service projects, book clubs, yoga and meditation groups, other support groups – It enough to make you wonder, why bother; do I really need church?

Well this one article hit the nail on the head. Sometimes I need a reminder. I have a really bad memory. It's true! When it comes to remembering who I am – child of God! -- I have a terrible memory. When it comes to remembering what God has done, and continues to do in and through Jesus Christ, I am a total airhead! I forget who I am. I forget who God is. I forget God's amazing good news that there really is hope. There is redemption, renewal, and beauty all around me, and I need a reminder.

That's what Jesus is doing here. I need church because I'm distracted. We all are! I need to be reminded because I have a million other things on my mind – duties and demands competing for my attention all the time!

I'm not talking about the church building of course. I'm talking about you. I'm talking about the people – the organic collective, the flesh and blood body of Christ -- the

hands, feet and 'whatever-else-of-Christ' that I find in here, within these walls on Sunday mornings. Remind me who and what I am – beloved child of God.

Have you heard the statistics about children's self-esteem relative to the messages they hear? Psychologists say that for every negative message children hear about themselves, they need to hear ten positive ones to restore their sense of self-esteem back to where it was before! TEN positive messages! Now, I don't know if anyone has studied this in groups other than elementary kids, but I have a feeling that number goes way up during adolescence! and I don't think adults are any different...What do you think?

We become what we are named. Call a child lazy long enough and often enough, and I guarantee you will have raised up a lazy adult. Call a child -- or a teen or an adult for that matter -- worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she -- all of us! -- will live into the name we've been given. In the same way, call us good or useful, dependable, helpful, or worthwhile, and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well.

That's what Jesus is doing. He's naming the people, and those folks never heard anything like it before. He's reminding them that they are already children of God – beloved of God

He doesn't tell them to go get salty. He doesn't tell them they have to go and find something to shine their light on. He just – for the first time in this lesson from the Mount – he looks them in the eye and says, "You are the salt of the earth." You are the light of the world... Already... Blessed are you.