

Shine

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
February 5, 2017
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Matthew 5:13-20



“You are the salt of the earth...”

“You are the light of the world...”

But...

We had come to the end of a week of summer camp at Tishomingo State Park in Mississippi, tired, but full of faith. It was one of those weeks when we were really able to grasp our faith. It was formative – with morning prayers, Scripture study, games that built community, and meaningful evening worship around a campfire. We were becoming clear about who we were in Christ:

We were children of God.

We were the salt of the earth.

We were the light of the world.

The Saturday morning when we were about to leave for home, I was startled awake by muffled noises that gradually transitioned to anxious shouts. A group of boys had surrounded Nathan’s bunk, and were dragging him from bed. He was wearing the same long-sleeve shirt and blue jeans he had on since the previous Sunday. He was too self-conscious to shower, or even to change in front of anyone, so he just *didn’t*. His smell preceded him most of the week. He was rather awkward – laughing at the wrong times, alternating between talking way too much and going into long periods of silence when he wouldn’t make eye contact or respond to anything. It was painful to watch.

He and I had become better acquainted throughout the week. I’m sure he would have called me a friend. I was one of the few that he seemed to relax somewhat around.

Some of the boys in our cabin, who were also friends, decided Nathan needed a shower before he went home. And so they dragged him screaming into the bathroom and put him in the shower, soaping him up with his clothes on. Their laughter seemed to feed on itself, and they were oblivious to his cries. It was an act of cruelty, pure and simple, an affront to the faith we all professed.

While all this was going on in the shower room, Nathan's mom arrived to pick him up. She walked into the cabin and immediately heard his crying. She ran into the shower. The perpetrators came out and quickly left. A few minutes later, Nathan and his mom emerged. He was soaking wet and sniffing. He never looked at me. His mom guided him to his bed and packed up his clothes while he stood looking at the ground. Then she tenderly eased him out the door, stopping in the doorway just long enough to look back at me, sitting on the bottom bunk, where I had been the whole time.

I thought about that when I read the words of author George Saunders from his 2013 Commencement address at Syracuse University. He said, "What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded...sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly."¹

My failure went beyond kindness. It was a failure of faith. I was afraid, and responded, not sensibly, or reservedly, or mildly, but not at all.

"You are the salt of the earth. *But* if salt has lost its saltiness, it is good for nothing... You are the light of the world. *But*, no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket..."

Only I had. While my friend was being humiliated, I allowed fear, insecurity, lack of self-worth, the need to be liked, the desire to remain under the radar – whatever you want to name it – to keep me firmly planted safely on my bed, like salt-less salt, like a lamp hidden under so many layers, invisible, useless...

Jesus blesses us in this text by telling us the truth about ourselves. Notice he doesn't say, "You *can* be the salt of the earth if you try really hard. You *will be allowed* to be the light of the world if you earn it. If you hustle for it, you can shine. No, he gathers us around him this morning, looks us in the eye, and tells us who we are.

You *are* the salt of the earth. You are already a gift for the earth – placed here precisely to flavor the world. You are, everywhere you go church, bearing in your

¹ George Saunders, [Advice to Graduates](#), *The New York Times*, July 31, 2013.

baptism the very kingdom of God, which, like salt, brings life to all. You are chosen and called to make a difference, right here and right now. You – salt of the earth.

You *are* the light of the world. Again, there is no wiggle room, no chance at all that you can be anything other than this thing, which is light to illuminate the world.

“*You* are the light of the world.” Right now, you reflect the glory of your God, and you are placed in the world to illuminate the darkness. You are a gift.

And the “you” here is plural – in the south we would translate it – “Ya’ll are the light of the world.” The church is placed in the world to reflect God’s light. God’s kingdom bursts forth as light in the darkness. You, collectively, are the bearers of that light.

The church is a gift to the world. We are the Body of Christ, which is God’s grace – God’s salt, God’s light – not for our own sake, but for the sake of the place we find ourselves, for the sake of the earth, for the sake of the world.

Salt and light are truly known only in relation to other things – seasoning and illuminating. They do not exist for themselves.

Jesus knows that we are human. He knows that our tendency is to take the gift of our identity and trample it underfoot, hide it under a basket. We who have been set in the world to shine can easily allow fear to rule us, and our gifts go underground. And so his blessing comes with a reminder: our identity in Christ, the coming of the kingdom, is not for ourselves alone. It is for the world. Salt that has lost its saltiness is no good, a lamp hidden under a basket illuminates nothing. Let your light shine.

I sat on that bunk bed at camp knowing that I could walk into that place of humiliation and stand with my friend. It was clear in that moment that all the Scripture study, all the worship, all the faith formation of the week pointed to one action. To be salt, to shine in the darkness of that moment with the reflected light of mercy and justice. To stand with my friend, to risk the ridicule, the persecution, the shame even, of standing in that vulnerable place as a follower of Christ.

It did not happen...that day. But my identity, our identity, does not go away because of our failures. God’s grace picks us up, and reminds us again of our baptism – we are salt, we are light. Christ summons us again and again to look at the world through the lens of his life, for our righteousness to see beyond the letter of the law to its true intent, which is mercy and love and grace for all.

The moment will come. Maybe it will come in Greece. Maybe in a Sunday school class or at a youth gathering. Maybe in the workplace, or your school. Maybe in Wilson Hall. Maybe on-line. That moment will come when you and I have the chance to be salt, to shine a reflected light in the darkness – to show the compassion of the kingdom, even if it means taking a risk, the risk of love.

Jesus reminds us, as we sit on the bed contemplating taking that risky step into the place of pain, that we already are salt and light. So let us rise up, church, and be who we are. Let us shine. Amen.