

“Let Your Light Shine Before Others”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Matthew 5: 13-20**

If there has ever been a winter to remember, or to forget, depending on your point of view, this has been it. We’ve lived through bitterly-cold temperatures for our area, and we’ve had the seventh-snowiest winter in our city’s history – and we’re only into the second week of February. I don’t think our children have been to school for a full week which didn’t have delays or cancellations since before Christmas. And you know something is just wrong when it is 40 degrees warmer at the site of the Winter Olympics than it is in Indiana.

I think what has gotten me more than anything has been the long winter nights and short winter days. I remember back in January feeling as if the sun couldn’t rise fast enough, and it set far too early in the afternoon. Our bodies are naturally conditioned to respond to sunlight, and it’s not unusual for us to feel depressed or down during the winter, when the daylight hours are the shortest. Combine that with the snow and cold and ice we’ve been living through over the last six weeks, and it can feel very dark indeed.

When our family was in Scotland last summer, we had the opposite experience. The United Kingdom is much further north than us in the Midwest, and the summer days often are filled with 16-18 hours of daylight. But, Debbie and I have also lived there in the winter, and the opposite is very hard to get used to. Days that have only 6-7 hours of daylight are not uncommon in the north of Scotland in the winter. Combine that with cloudy, rainy weather, and it can feel very dark indeed.

The darkness of winter can remind us of the dark places of our own lives and the world in which we live. We hear of another shooting death in our city, and we either react with fear and trepidation, or we simply retreat into numbness with the ever-increasing repetition of such violence. We struggle with helping a family member make healthier decisions about their future and well-being, but that is countered with the darkness of addiction and self-indulgence. We yearn for inspiration and excitement in our career or job, but we operate in a darkness of the mundane with co-workers or superiors who are stuck in the grind. The darkness of winter can definitely accentuate the weariness we might be feeling in our daily walk of faith.

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the folks who put together the lectionary readings for today offer some hope and light to shine in the darkness of the winter doldrums. In this passage from Matthew,

Jesus has just spoken the Beatitudes at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. Now, he is speaking of salt and light and his purpose in fulfilling the law. More than anything, he is offering hope to the people of God's coming kingdom, and he is empowering all his followers to be a light amid the darkness of the world, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16).

Three years ago, I was supposed to preach on this text. But does anyone remember what happened three years ago? We had the ice storm that shutdown the city for a week. We cancelled church that Sunday, and instead held our first-ever Facebook worship online. I went back and looked at some of the interactions we shared that day about this text, and I'll share some of those thoughts as we look at this text today.

Jesus begins by saying, "You are the salt of the earth." And yet, in our modern-day world, we often hear that salt is bad, that we should avoid too much salt for the sake of our health. How can salt enrich our lives?

One person noted that salt, when used in appropriate amounts, enriches food which otherwise would be bland, giving it an appealing taste. Salt also serves as a preservative, especially in days past when it was used for preserving meat before refrigeration was widespread. And salt is necessary in certain parts of nature for life to exist – consider the oceans and the fish and wildlife which depend on salt water to survive.

In the same way that salt provides flavor to food, Jesus calls us to flavor the world in which we live. And, when salt loses its taste, Jesus says, "it is no longer good for anything and is thrown out" (5:13). As members of the Body of Christ, our great diversity of gifts and experiences provide ample opportunities to enrich the world with God's love. If, however, we become comfortable or indifferent about the flavor God has given us, then we lose our saltiness and purpose from God. As one person put it, "Salt, when added to food, can bring out the best flavors. Bland Christians just blend in and really don't make a difference."

Marcia Riggs frames this metaphor in the following way: *"You are the salt of the earth," suggests that Jesus gives them as his disciples a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth. Like salt, which is used to alter or enhance the tastes of food, the disciples' capacity to elicit goodness as they participate on the earth should be of profound consequence. The danger for disciples is that they may lose that capacity by forgetting that they are to disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, and courageously standing for what they believe. Disciples who do not engage in such practices that humanize life on*

*earth will be like salt that has lost its taste* (*Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 284-286).

Jesus follows his analogy of salt with one of light: “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 a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (5:14-15). This analogy is straightforward: the purpose of light is to illumine the darkness, so that all might see. We don’t have nightlights in our rooms all covered-up; that would defeat the purpose of having a light on in the first place. Light offers clarity, vision, and calm in places that would usually be filled with uncertainty, blindness, and fear.

How do we live out being “the light of the world?” Three years ago, people responded in various ways. We are God’s light in how we welcome visitors whenever they walk through our doors at church. We are God’s light in our outreach and mission to our community. We are God’s light in how we live each day in our daily routine. We are God’s light by helping someone with a particular need, with no expectation of something offered in return. We are God’s light when we speak out against a perceived injustice, rather than remaining silent, hiding ourselves under the bushel basket.

Jesus is speaking these words not only to the masses gathered on a hillside in Galilee, but also to his newly-appointed disciples. For me, it’s as if he’s saying to them, “Look, the light I’m giving you is not something that you just keep to yourself. It’s something which is for the entire world. Don’t forget that, because it’s through your good works that God is working, and will give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Or consider how Archbishop William Temple puts it: “The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” How does that sit with you? Kind of unsettling, isn’t it? The church can’t exist without its members, can it? I mean, we have to have members to serve as leaders, to financially support the organization and its operation, to provide for fellowship and study and organize its activities. Isn’t that why we exist – to keep things afloat and secure for those who have said that John Knox Presbyterian Church is their church home?

“The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” The light we are to shine before others is not a light for us within these walls. The light we are to shine is for all the world, for those who are not our members. When we focus too much on ourselves, we are hiding under a bushel basket. When we become overly-internally focused, then we have become bland like salt that has lost its taste.

How do we keep a proper focus – as individuals and as the church – so that our light shines before others? A colleague made a comment recently that spoke to me on this topic. In his church, they say there are

some things they do sitting in rows, and there are some things they do sitting in circles. When you're sitting in rows, you're primarily receiving, usually passively, but when you are sitting in circles, you are often giving and receiving, usually actively.

If you are primarily experiencing faith by sitting in rows, then you might be on the verge of losing your saltiness. If you are not balancing your life of faith with experiences in circles or active interaction, then your light might not be shining as brightly as God wishes. If our first reaction, when we are asked to help or serve in a particular way, is to come up with an excuse why we can't do it – then maybe we have forgotten how the light of God shined on us through someone else, and how are called to shine that light to others.

As a church, our view must be outward-focused, not solely inward-focused. When our decisions are guided more by how our membership will feel, rather than how it will impact our mission to the world, then we have become bland and tasteless, and we can no longer see in the darkened room. God has not called us to create an exclusive club where we will always be comfortable and secure. God has called the church into being to shine light in the darkness, to enliven the rigid, and to do works in this world which give God the glory.

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Let it be so, today, tomorrow, and all our days. Amen.