

SALT AND LIGHT
Matthew 5:13-20
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 9, 2014

How many times have you heard:
“Children should be seen but not heard!”
“Never talk about religion!”
“Religion is a personal matter!”

These “rules” have probably done more to shape our practice of spirituality than the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount combined. How’s that? Because you think you’ll be ostracized if you break them.

But unlike the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, these three rules should be broken.

First: “Children should be seen but not heard.” When you think about it, this is actually sanctioned intimidation. The unintended consequences? Even after children grow up and become adults, many will still be intimidated and not speak up when confronted by authority figures.

Second: “Never talk about religion.” The connotation being you can’t talk about religion without getting into a big fight. Reasonable, thoughtful conversations about convictions are pipedreams (so the argument goes) because inevitably someone always tries to win the argument. But why must these necessary conversations always end in arguments?

Third: “My religion is a personal matter between me and God.” That’s not what the Bible says. Correction: Christianity isn’t a private, personal religion and Christianity isn’t all about you. What’s more, Jesus isn’t “my personal savior” the same way “Trevor is my personal trainer.” Instead being Christian is really all about bringing Christ to your neighbor by the way you live and sometimes even by what you say.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus just finished preaching the Beatitudes. What immediately follows is what we call the Sermon on the Mount and today’s passage begins with Jesus declaring in no uncertain terms, Christians are to be seen and Christians are to be heard. Christians are supposed to share their faith. What you believe shouldn’t be a secret to be kept, but a story to be told.

At the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount Jesus used several metaphors encouraging us not to keep the Gospel a secret, the first being, “You are the salt of the earth.” (Matthew 5:13)

Today we use salt to season our food, but before modern refrigeration, salt had an equally important use. Salt was a precious necessity because it kept meat from spoiling. But besides keeping food from going bad, people also used salt to keep their food from being bland.

So, “You are the salt of the earth,” communicates the message God’s people are a precious commodity, needed to permeate the world and keep it from decay so the Kingdom of God can take root and grow.

Another point to consider: When you salt food, doesn’t it become food? Likewise Christians can become part of the world to give an unmistakable flavor to life that otherwise would be missing.

Unfortunately too many Christians tend to retreat from the world and create a bunker mentality. This brand of Christian sees the world as a threat to our way of life, so it’s tempting to be separated from the world God loves. By the way, the Hebrew word Pharisee translates into the English word “separatists.” Isn’t that what the Pharisees did? They separated themselves from their neighbors to form a closed society believing they alone were preserving the essence of Israel’s covenant with God. But what started out as a good idea had unintended consequences. By closing themselves off from the world, many Pharisees became close minded and instead of being the guardians of their heritage, outsiders saw them as the guardians of an exclusive club they had no desire to join.

Not unlike Jesus’ day, we are living in a world in transition, moving farther away from a homogenous faith based society to a more secular, pluralistic society. When you think about it we’re probably becoming more like the world Jesus lived in two thousand years ago.

The Roman Empire was a global community and Christianity was just one of many religions. What’s more, the first generation of Christians was perceived by most reasonable even enlightened people as being infected with superstitious beliefs and practices.

Then how on earth did the Christian Gospel spread so quickly?

Because the first Christians took Jesus at his word when he said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. No one lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lamp stand... In the same way, let your light shine...so others may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Do you realize what Jesus is saying about you? And yes, if you’re a believer, Jesus is talking directly to you as well as all of us put together.

“YOU are the light of the world.” Hard to believe, isn’t it? You probably thought Jesus was the light of the world, but according to Jesus, you are too.

You might be thinking, “Well I don’t feel very bright,” but how you feel doesn’t really matter. If Jesus declared you are the light of the world there’s no arguing with him. Whether you feel like it or not, if you’re in Christ you’re glowing with his light and when you let it in, it becomes your light and your light will, if you let it, penetrate the enveloping darkness and bring God’s truth and grace into every situation.

Do you see what’s going on here? Jesus is telling you to forget everything you’ve been taught about keeping your faith a secret. You are expected to be seen and heard. Your religion isn’t your private business. It’s supposed to be passed on.

That’s how the Christian Gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, the global, pluralistic system of its time. The Gospel spread because Jesus’ followers took his Sermon on the Mount seriously. They heard Jesus when he told them, “You are the salt and light of the world.” Their love for Christ and their understanding of his teachings empowered enough of them to break the rules of polite society and preach his Gospel, by word and deed, to anyone who would see and listen.

So then, what new message should you take away from this scripture, which you’ve heard hundreds of times before?

First, take Jesus, and his teaching, seriously. No matter what you think about yourself you are by God’s grace both the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and together, we are a city on a hill, empowered through Christ to be these things so others may come to believe what we already believe, Jesus is the Christ and his Kingdom is coming.

Second, make the commitment to live like the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Do your part to help make yourself and our faith community that city on the hill.

Let me give you a few simple suggestions to make these things possible.

1) Ask God to give you a mental picture of someone you know in your neighborhood, at work or school, in your circle of friends who needs light and salt in his or her life. What I’m about to suggest will be one of those prayers in which the promise “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find” is especially applicable. I guarantee you God will tell you who he wants you to pray for.

2) When God answers your prayers and reveals who he wants you to pray for then start praying for that person. Ask God to help you discern how this individual’s life is going, prayerfully consider what he or she may be struggling with and ask God to give you an opening to begin having meaningful conversations that will solidify your relationship and earn his or her trust.

3) Don’t forget to pray for yourself. Ask God for discernment, wisdom and the heart of a child, because it’s very possible God will be calling on you to love and shepherd your friend into the Kingdom.

Finally, forget the mantras children should be seen but not heard, never talk about your religion, and what you believe is a private matter between you and God.

Instead remember what Jesus said, you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth, and together we are a city on a hill.

Let me finish the morning with the wonderful way the ancient Celtic missionaries spread the Gospel to the Irish in just one generation. Two or three Christian missionaries would enter a village and settle in and made themselves available to their new neighbors. If someone was sick, they visited, if a roof needed thatching, they'd show up. When the harvest needed to be taken in before the first frost, these men of God were there to help.

Sooner than later these strangers would be asked, "Why are you so good and helpful?" The missionaries would respond, "You really want to know?" If the answer was "yes," they'd tell the story and Gospel of Jesus and how Jesus changed their lives for good.

"So let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."