

# **Preaching Discipleship: A Little Dab'll Do Ya<sup>1</sup>**

Matthew 5:13-16

February 6, 2011

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

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. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, pastor/head of staff at First Presbyterian, Dallas, for this sermon title and for his paper on this text from *The Well* (Davidson, 2010). Joe is old enough to reference this Brylcreem commercial. I knew we had him around for a reason...

We are spending some time over the next few weeks focusing on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that begins with the Beatitudes which we read last week.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' longest speech in Matthew's gospel. In it, Jesus preaches to his disciples as well as the crowds that are gathered. Scholars are clear that Matthew recounts this sermon in his gospel because he wants the reader to understand that Jesus is preaching to us; the church. Another way you might think about it, down here in the South, is that any time Jesus says "you" in this sermon, he means it as a "y'all." Jesus' purpose in preaching to us is to shape the church into communities of committed disciples.

Today we pick up with some of Jesus' most memorable metaphors of this church to which he speaks. I am reading from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, beginning at verse 13. Listen with me for the word of God.

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One of things that helps anytime you read, study, and learn from scripture is if you can get a sense of what was happening around the time that the scripture was written.

Tom Long, a scholar on Matthew's gospel, says that "Matthew's church was almost certainly located in an urban, cosmopolitan, and prosperous environment. ... Matthew's setting was one where people had to carve out an identity among many competing possibilities ...the most frequent suggestion is that Matthew's church was located in Antioch of Syria, a sizeable metropolis with a large, mixed population."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, people who went to Matthew's church made a conscious choice. Being a Christian wasn't expected of them. In fact, the church was often ignored by the culture around them.

It is, I think, for this reason that Jesus chooses his metaphors for how to be a community of disciples. Salt. Light. In other places, Jesus uses the metaphor of yeast, or mustard seeds. These things have one thing in

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long. "Matthew," in *Westminster Bible Companion* (Westminster/JKP: Louisville, 1997,) pp. 2-3.

common – they are small; they seem insignificant; **but** they have an impact.

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Stop me if you have heard this before, but over the past 20 years or so much ink has been spilled telling the story about the decline of the church in North America. The latest article I read was emailed to me from Friday's *Wall Street Journal*.

It's not news to us. Did you know that this congregation used to be 2,100 members? Some of you in this room remember that time. From what I have heard and from what I have read, it was time of great excitement; of great pride.

Today our congregation is a little more than a third of that number, and you know what? We worry about it. We worry about what it means about our effectiveness. We worry about what it means about our leadership. We worry about what it means about our future. All valid points, mind you. All worth exploring.

But we also worry about what it means for our influence. We worry about what it means for our reputation.

The fact is, even the membership of our congregation today is in the top 5% of the denomination. It is true in other denominations, as well. Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists...the numbers are similar. Non-denominational "mega-churches," those that average more than 2,000 people in worship get a lot of press for their growth, but the story that doesn't get told is that while many people come in the front door of those kinds of churches, just as many leave out the back door. Even the megachurches are flummoxed over how to sustain the membership of their congregations.

Should we be satisfied by this decline? I certainly hope not. Should we be open to change and attempt to offer a more compelling witness to the world around us? I think we'd better. But should the focus and energy of the church be spent worrying about what we've lost?

Consider this: perched on the mount and preaching to the church – past, present, and future – Jesus does not call us to be a dominant voice in the

culture. Nowhere are we called to increase our membership or our endowments. In the words of my preacher friend from Dallas, Jesus does not call us to be the “hippest, latest, greatest thing. [We are not called to be everything to everybody...] We are not the Pan-Asian cuisine of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> We are the salt of the earth. The light of the world.

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We are entering a new reality as a church, you and I. Sometimes it is hard to see it here in the buckle of the Bible belt – but just ask your friends or family who live on the west coast, or those who live in the northeast...we live in a culture that cares less and less about the significance of the church, especially Protestant churches like us.

Did you know that for the first time since its founding the Supreme Court has no Protestant on its bench? It is a sign of the times we are in.

So I, for one, am glad that Jesus didn’t use metaphors that speak of the church’s might, or influence, or power. I am glad that Jesus talked about the church in terms of quality instead of quantity; of seasoning instead of overpowering – where only a pinch can do a lot to infuse the world with the flavor of God’s kingdom.

On the one hand, I think Jesus’ metaphors for the church are liberating – to be unhinged from the expectation that the church needs to be the dominant voice in society; the chaplain to the culture. There are 350 million people in our country and 7 billion around the world. That is a lot of parishioners! On the other hand, I think Jesus’ metaphors for the church help us focus on our priority – which is not to exist for our own sake, but to be sent into the world to bear the good news of the kingdom<sup>4</sup>.

And I believe that understanding the church’s purpose to be *sent* – to be salt and light in the world – is not only different than understanding the church’s purpose to exist for its own sake...it is a whole lot more compelling.

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<sup>3</sup> Again, with thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford.

<sup>4</sup> There is plenty more to read on this. A good place to start is a book edited by Darrell Guder called, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998).

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We are called to be salt and light.

In January of 1990 a Presbyterian youth group in Columbia, South Carolina had an idea. Understanding that as Christians, they had a responsibility to feed the hungry, they thought Super Bowl Sunday might be a good time to collect food. They were a witty bunch, so they called named their idea the “Souper Bowl of Caring” and they collected money in soup pots after worship. The idea spread. To date, the Souper Bowl of Caring has raised over \$73 million for neighbors in need.<sup>5</sup>

They are salt.

This past week in the midst of freedom protests in Egypt, a group of Christians formed a human shield around thousands of their Muslim countrymen who took time away from the demonstrations to kneel in the street in prayer.<sup>6</sup>

They are light.

Being salt and light means you see holes in the way our system cares for the homeless and you start the Providence House.

It means you use your woodworking hobby and create a program that makes toys for children who live in poverty.

It means renovating a 90 year old church building in order that it can be better used by the community into which it shares the gospel.

It means knitting toys for children who are at risk of falling into a life of crime.

It means standing up for the kid in your class who gets bullied because of who they are.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.souperbowl.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.good.is> (from February 3). Also interesting to note, on January 8<sup>th</sup> in Alexandria, Egypt, thousands of Muslims surrounded a Coptic Christian Church to create a human shield for those Egyptian Christians to worship. On New Year’s Day, a church was bombed by Islamic radicals that killed 23 people (also reported by <http://www.good.is>).

All that might sound insignificant. It might not make headlines. It might even seem trivial, compared to the influence of the culture around us...but it is exactly what Jesus described when he encouraged his followers to be the church, the ones sent out into the world to point toward the kingdom of God.

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What I find very interesting, and very hopeful is that, according to people who study these things more closely than me<sup>7</sup>, it is the churches who are less concerned about their existence and their future and more concerned about exhibiting God's kingdom that are starting to bend the curve and attract new members. This is true not only in non-denominational megachurches but in congregations like ours.

I think these new members join, not because the church needs them – but because the new members have seen the church engaged in God's mission, and they want to be a part.

Jesus sends us out in order that the work we do would give glory to God.

Sitting on the mountain, proclaiming a word for us, encouraging us, motivating us, Jesus says:

**Y'all are salt.**

**Y'all are light.**

May it be so.

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<sup>7</sup> The Rev. Adam Hamilton being one of them. Adam is the pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, MO - a Methodist Church with over 10,000 in worship. The Rev. Bryan McDowell told me about his speech at a fundraiser at Centenary College last week where he made this observation.