

*The Exhibition of the
Kingdom of Heaven to the World*

*Summer Series on the
Great Ends of the Church*

from the pulpit of
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Matthew 5:1-2, 13-16

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “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 the 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.

It was a foggy day here in Bryn Mawr. The sky alternated between drizzle and rain, thunder even made periodic appearances.¹ It was a day that, had it been based on weather alone, many would have overlooked without so much as a worry to what they missed. Yet on that day, attention was focused beyond the rain clouds and descending fog. Eyes strained to see past the hovering precipitation, above the immediate context, to an event taking place thousands of miles away. On July 20th, fifty years ago, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first people to walk on the moon.

It is one of those moments that implants itself into your being. ‘Where were you when you heard?,’ the conversation goes. The front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer contained the massive headline “Man Walks on Moon” carrying Armstrong’s famous quote as the subtitle: “Small Step for Man, Giant Leap for Mankind.” And that’s just what it was, a step, and another step, followed by a whole series of steps we call walking. John Wilford, the author of the front page NY Times article for that day, commented, “We all walk. It is, literally, a pedestrian thing. But this is walking made glorious. A man landed. And walked. On the moon.”² It’s a pedestrian action, it’s walking, but it’s not just walking because of where it took place. Sometimes the most commonplace of things can become front page news when they happen where you never thought possible.

Walking is about as commonplace as speaking, and Jesus seems to constantly be walking and speaking. Today our scripture describes Jesus walking up a mountain, sitting down, and speaking to his disciples.

“You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.” Jesus says. In these words, theologian Larry Bouchard, says “the

¹ Weather information provided at www.farmersalmanac.com/

² Quoted in: John Schwartz, “The Story of 8 Unforgettable Words About Apollo 11,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2019.

kingdom of heaven is being realized.”³ Jesus says this with the direct second person, “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.” You.

These are not mere words, they are claims of identity. Jesus is speaking to the disciples, and he’s speaking to the larger crowd through time and space. He’s speaking to you and me. We have a lot in common with the disciples. Like them, we have already been called and we have begun our training. We have chosen to follow Jesus already, having heard rumors and promises that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, but every now and then we find ourselves nursing our own doubts and confusions. We sit down at the feet of Jesus, hear the teaching, and can’t shake the nagging feeling that perhaps the “you” Jesus so emphatically speaks to does not mean me. You try to follow Jesus, yes, but there’s that thing you did years ago that surely will forever leave its stain on your record. You want to be a disciple but your relationship with your kids, or your spouse, or your parents, calls it into question. Surely, Jesus wants people with less baggage, you say, surely Jesus wants people who haven’t caused such a mess. Surely, the “you” Jesus speaks to does not mean me. Jesus surely cannot want the angry, the disenchanting, the broken, the quitter, the failure, the skeptic.

Qualifiers like these dominate our lives. That business opportunity didn’t go as you expected, so now you’re the flop. Your children didn’t follow the path you so desperately struggled to keep them on, so now you’re the failure. Your loved one received the diagnosis no one expected and you can’t imagine why God would do this, so now you’re the disenchanting. Life can give us plenty of qualifiers.

I imagine Jesus knew this truth about life, that we can be defined by what we’ve done or what’s happened to us. I imagine Jesus saw how

³ Larry D. Bouchard, "Matthew 5:13-16: Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Chapters 1-13*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, vol. 1, *Feasting on the Word Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 80.

easy it is to become labeled by our actions. When Jesus proclaims, “you are the salt, you are the light,” he wants you to accept a different qualifier. No matter what qualifier you give yourself, what labeled has been appendaged to your being throughout your life, Jesus desires to bring you close, to have you sit down, and offer you a new label.

I imagine Jesus also knew we would be hesitant to believe him. I think he knew his own disciples would betray him, that those closest to him would have their doubts, that individuals who had been with him for years would flee to save themselves, and so he adds a little extra to each metaphor. “You are the salt of the earth, *but* if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored...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 the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” Jesus is not telling his disciples, he is not telling you, that you are exceptionally worthy or qualified or deserving. He is just telling you the truth. The reality is that you *are* the salt of the earth, you *are* the light of the world. What’s more, this really is not really about you; it’s about God and the coming kingdom. It’s not about your past, or about that thing that keeps you awake at night, or about the good work you have done or might have done. It’s about God and it’s about who God has made you to be. It’s about the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,” Jesus adds. It’s as if Jesus is trying to say, the credit is not yours either way, so don’t worry about it. You are the salt, you are the light, so shine, because that is your identity. That is who God made you to be.

We were created to shine. We were created to give glory to God in heaven so that others might learn about the God we worship and do likewise. You are a lantern lit by God designed to shine on earth. If we light a lantern, of course we wouldn’t put it under a basket or in a closet. We’d place it on a table in the center of the room so that it can do what it does best: glow brightly. Professor Matthew Myer Boulton adds, “Not only is it absurd to hide a glowing lantern, it’s also dangerous. It

involves a fundamental, even reckless misunderstanding of what a lamp is, how it works, and what it is for. “You are not made to be hidden,” Jesus insists. “You are made for shining, for illuminating, for giving light to all in the house.” If we take this mission seriously, it will fundamentally shift how we organize our days, in terms of both what we do and how we do it.”⁴ It is reckless to believe that you were not made to shine.

A few years back I was in Jakarta, wandering through a rather large, crowded city market. There were stands with necklaces and bracelets, stalls full of various meats and breads. As I was pushing my way through I stumbled upon a shop selling beautiful tapestries. I stopped and was gazing at one when I noticed that in the back of the stall you could see four women making the tapestries right there. The beginning of it hung from the ceiling and the women ferociously wove together each line. They were moving so quickly you could actually see the pattern come together. I was mesmerized. While watching, though, I noticed there was a mistake in the tapestry on the far left. The woman was progressing fiercely but it was clear she had messed up a few lines prior. I looked around to see if anyone else saw what I saw. I thought, “should I tell her she messed up? Does she know?” I worried she would have to undo her work to go back and fix this mistake. As I kept watching it became clear she had seen her mistake, and as a result, she had simply adjusted her pattern to include it! By the end, she had woven together this complex, beautiful tapestry, with what I saw as the mistake being an integral part of it. Rather than redoing the tapestry, the “mistake” became the start of a new pattern.

I do not know what caused the mistake in this woman’s tapestry. Perhaps she was distracted, perhaps she slipped, perhaps there was an imperfection in the material, perhaps someone else sabotaged it. I do not know. Regardless, what I do know is the mistake was not removed or

⁴ Matthew Myer Boulton, “Matthew 5:13-16: Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Chapters 1-13*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, vol. 1, *Feasting on the Word Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 84.

even seen as a mistake, but instead woven together into the larger tapestry. It was the opportunity to start a new pattern. I couldn't see this until many lines later. For a while it looked out of place, felt out of place, but later I saw it had been crafted together into this beautiful creation.

My fixation on the mistake caused me to miss much of the beauty of this woman's creation. Once I took a wider glance then I could see the beauty that was all around me. Fixation on mistakes, on the ways we do not believe we deserve to be salt and light in this world, will always detract from the beauty that is at the very core of who God made us to be. We all have things we wish we didn't do, events we wish we could take back, words that spilled out at just the wrong moment that did the most amount of damage. None of this surprises Jesus. His response remains, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, now shine."

When we take Jesus' words seriously, when we accept our own undeserving nature and God's unmerited grace working through us, then others begin to take notice. As the church of Jesus Christ, as individuals committed to following our savior, we are called to be the light that shines for the benefit and care of others. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple once observed, "the church is the only organization on earth that exists primarily for those who are not its members."⁵ All of us shine. You, the one who volunteers daily at the local shelter because you know what it means to be without a safe place to live, shine. You, the one who cares for children or parents who cannot care for themselves, shine. You, who has walked on the moon, or struggles to walk at all, shine. Whoever you are, whatever you're going through, there is someone else who can learn and grow and be supported because the gift you are to this world. So shine.

⁵ This quote is largely attributed to William Temple. Others attribute it to G.K. Chesterton. The essence of the quote can be found in: William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1942).

To shine like this, we need other people. We need to be sustained by our neighbors, by those who sit alongside us this morning. One way we do this is through the practice of communion. In a few minutes you'll be invited to come forward, take a piece of bread, dip it into the cup, and "take, eat." In so doing, you join the long list of the faithful who have partaken of this bread and cup so that they might, in turn, go out to shine and exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world. It's bread and wine, but it's not just bread, and just wine because of its context.

When we take the bread and drink the wine in this space, it transforms us to shine in the world. It is for us the body and blood of Christ that unites us to the larger family of faith, stretching from the earliest Christians all the way to Buzz Aldrin, an ordained Presbyterian elder who celebrated communion on the moon, to us today. When we believe Jesus' words that you are the salt of the earth, that you are the light of the world, it compels us to exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the entire world, regardless of the things in our past that we think make us undeserving. An ordinary action, done in an unexpected place will make front page news. They were only a few footsteps, but they were walked on the moon. It's only a piece of bread, and a dip from the cup, but it's the lifegiving, world changing act of communing with God and one another. It's only salt and light, but by God's love and mercy impacts and permeates the entire world. It's only you, and me, but when God is at work through us, we shine with unparalleled beauty. God created you to shine with the light of Christ for all to see. So shine.

Amen.