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Matthew 5:13-16

## SALTY AND LUMINOUS

One of the strangest things about what Christianity has become in our time is that it is so completely focused on “beliefs,” on propositions to which one gives intellectual assent. Christians are always being asked to make a decision about the virgin birth, the miracles as suspension of natural law, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, the second coming, the literal, infallible nature of scripture — as if God is grading an exam and passing some people into heaven while flunking others into hell.

Yet the Sermon on the Mount, the heart and soul of an underground movement that was first called “The Way” because it is an *imitation of* Jesus not a list of beliefs *about* Jesus, does not contain a single word about what to believe. It is an Alternative Ethic, and a very radical one at that, taught by a man who may have believed the world was about to end, and whose disciples walked away from their old lives to live in a new order, to value others in a completely new way, to change the world from the inside out.

I listen to preachers and they are always telling me what I need to believe to be saved. I listen to Jesus, and he is always telling me how to behave, how to love, how to heal, how to listen, how to think about and model the wisdom of the world instead of being, well – a fool — trying to gain the whole world and lose my own soul.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a new doctrine. It is a call to leave behind the things we think are wise, valuable, precious, and eternal, and embrace the only thing that is truly forever: love. He does not threaten us with punishment if we do not follow. He does not hand out a list of official positions on anything. He does not take advantage of people who are grieving or feeling guilty or desperate to be told what to think. In short, Jesus gives us no creeds in the Sermon on the Mount, not one. Yet by the fourth century, with the adoption of the great creeds

of the church, like the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, we would flip this idea on its head. And Christianity would be all about what one believes, and woe to those who have other ideas.

In doing research for my next book, I learned that in the 250 years after Constantine, correct belief, or “orthodoxy” became so important in the church that Christian killed 25,000 other Christians who did not “believe” the right things about Jesus. They were hanged, or beheaded, or burned at the stake as heretics. Because they did not happen to agree with the official position of the church, now fused with and corrupted by the Roman empire, on doctrines the church itself had invented and which had nothing whatsoever to do with being a follower of Jesus.

We turned the poetry of Jesus into prose, and gave new meaning to the word “prosaic.” He showed us faith as relationship, and we turned it into a cosmic transaction. He called us “salt and light” and did not expect anyone to think that meant we belonged in a shaker on the table at IHOP, or that we literally glowed in the dark depending on whether we were a high-wattage bishop or just an uneducated little refrigerator light.

He meant we were agents of change. Salt was used to preserve food, and light was life in a world of darkness and death. This wasn’t about some other world, or walking around winking at other saved people and wearing that Mona Lisa smile and saying, “I’ll pray for you” (which really means I’ll tell God to make you just like me). He did not say that he knew where you could *get* some salt, or where you could go to see the light. He said we were already in possession of these qualities, if we would but respond in joy and thanksgiving to the God who gave them to us to begin with.

Christians are not supposed to be aloof and self-satisfied. We are supposed to be salty and luminous. We’re not supposed to take over the world; we are supposed to *season* it. We are *not* Christian soldiers marching as to war (followers of Jesus were forbidden from wearing the uniform of any army for the first 200 years of the church), we are leaven in the loaf of the empire, corrupting it with love. Our light is *reflected* light, not like a searchlight chasing sinners down some dark alley and arresting them in the name of Jesus. We are not flashlight; we are candlelight.

Have I ever seen this? Yes I have. At Christmas, I saw Willie Ream at 363 draping the necks of homeless people with the scarves that you had knitted for them. It looked oddly beautiful like a kind of knighting ceremony, where in giving a gift she was really bestowing an honor — you are worthy. She even chatted them up (you know Willie): “that color looks good on you. Do you want to take a scarf with you for someone else, for a loved one? What color do you think they would like?” And in that moment, the vast and painful inequities of the world melted away for just a second. An 80 year old woman leaning forward to put a garland of love around the neck of someone who doesn’t own anything that beautiful, has never seen anything that beautiful, does not believe that she deserves anything that beautiful. Salt and light. What’s

an argument over the virgin birth compared to that?

This may come as a shock to you, but Christians do not always have a reputation for being either salty or luminous. More often they appear grim, humorless, suspicious, judgmental, haughty and fearful. Oliver Wendell Holmes said once, “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted like undertakers.” Robert Louis Stevenson put the case more bluntly in a journal entry: “I have been to church today, and am not depressed.”

I think that when Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he recognized how quickly greed and indifference lead to decay. If you don’t mind extending the metaphor, friendships and marriages are like teeth – they are generally lost through decay. All that is required for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. And unfortunately, we have lived through a time when idealism and activism are suspect, pejoratively referred to as a relic of the 60’s.

My students are sometimes interested to know what life was like “back in the day.” And they are talking about the 80’s. When I tell them I grew up in the 60’s they just look at me and say, “Oh wow . . .” Like you were around when the Beatles were around? Wasn’t that a wild time, you know, sex, drugs, and rock and roll?” I say, you mean as opposed to derivatives, meth and Gangster Rap? Don’t think of the past as all that different. It’s mostly a costume change. The rich and powerful lord it over the weak and wounded, and we still hurt most the ones we love. Kurt Vonnegut was right when he said in an early novel: *We do good too covertly and evil too overtly.*

And so along comes Jesus of Nazareth to say, you are the “salt of the earth.” First of all, because a little bit goes a long way. Just a pinch of salt is all you need. I mean, just consider the life of Jesus – from a backwater province living well before television, and super bowl commercials, who wrote nothing down, had a brief and tragic ministry mostly among the poor — and is now the central figure in human history. Salt and light.

In the time of Jesus, salt did not just preserve food, but was also considered to have medicinal qualities, as in Ezekiel’s description of a newborn being rubbed with salt. It was used in the sacrificial practices of Israel, especially in what was called the “covenant of salt.” When Jesus warned us about the possibility of salt losing its “saltiness,” he is saying that a bland Christian is a contradiction in terms – and of little use to the world.

Likewise the poet’s second metaphor: “You are the light of the world.” Don’t hide it. “Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works.” The Greek word here for “good” is *kalos*, which means beautiful, attractive, even winsome. That’s important because I

think that Christians have lost much of their aesthetic sensibility. They are far too utilitarian. The bumper sticker that says PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS is very much to the point. We don't have to be crusading against evil constantly, until nobody can even stand to be around us. We are supposed to notice little things as well, compliment beauty, encourage children, hold fast against despair.

Emily Dickenson wrote a poem that Bob Beardon read at his son's funeral yesterday:

*If I can stop one heart from breaking  
I shall not live in vain:  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.*

If I had but one wish for the church these days it would be this: LET THERE BE LIGHT. Stop fussing over who is saved and who is damned and tell the truth: we are all saved but we have forgotten where we came from, where we are going, and to whom we belong.

After the Tuscon shootings, in our brief moment of shock that passes as quickly as the home page of your browser is refreshed with stories about how to pinch away the fat on your belly, or why the cheese heads have the edge over the "steel curtain" otherwise known as "Dah-Fence." I think someone should ask Gabriel Giffords what she is thinking right now about point spread, injured quarterbacks, the best commercial, or whether Michelle Obama's red dress proves that she is indeed a Marxist.

Christians might want to consider that being salty and luminous does not mean being shy and retiring. A Baptist minister here in town has called for the resignation of a city official who thinks it is insane that we sell multiple bullet magazine clips to anyone who can walk into a gun show. This is not about the second amendment, he said. It's about a society that facilitates slaughter. The minister barked the same tired canard: machine guns don't kill people, people kill people. Don't blame the AK-47 or the Glock 9 millimeter, or the right to empty 40 rounds into Bambi. Blame the liberals. Or move to Canada.

When we have reached the point where something cannot be discussed, and we have reached that point with regard to gun control, that's exactly when someone needs to discuss it. Maybe it would be salty and luminous to tell the NRA where to go, and it won't be heaven. Have we lost our minds, or just our souls?

Or think of it this way: the United States tries to keep other countries from developing nuclear weapons, because we say, the more weapons, the greater the risk for tragedy. Would that we applied the same simple logic to our own society!

This business of being a light to the world is not a sweet, gift-shop scented candle, Guardian Angel sort of thing. I'm so glad that people have identified their personal angel to watch over them. But it's so selfish. I think if you've got an angel assigned to you, that you should loan them out to protect other people. Where were those angels in Tucson a month ago? Salt and light is not a shield and an insurance policy.

Salty and luminous Christians do not invite God into *their* story; God invites them into *God's* story. And God's story is always playing itself out in unexpected and counterintuitive ways. Non-violence is going to emerge the victor in Egypt's first ever people's movement. But we are so busy worrying about the Muslim Brotherhood that we have forgotten our own story: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." "Let my people go!" But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and so he sent his thugs into Tahrir square on in speeding vans to mow down unarmed protestors. Well, that's not exactly how it goes except that really, that's exactly how it goes.

Getting out of Egypt to avoid being killed should sound very familiar to us in the church. People don't want to eat bricks anymore, much less make them without straw. It is open season on dictators now, and there is no putting the genie back in the bottle now. 150 doctors volunteered to treat the wounded, and set up make-shift clinics in the streets. Wounded people went back again and again after they were bandaged up because they said, "This is our moment." While Pharaoh hunted down human rights activists, journalists, and of course, his own people, the salt and light of the Egyptian people could not be contained. An amputee in a wheelchair went into the square saying, "I still have my hands." An 80 year old woman, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, a leading Arab feminist who for decades has fought genital mutilation, white-haired and full of salt and light said something that should sound strangely familiar: "I feel born-again," and said she would stay overnight in the square, making her bed in midst of the chaos.

The church should be on the side of the Egyptian people, but where are the sermons hailing their courage and pledging our solidarity. I would like to believe that ministers all over the country are saying from their pulpits this morning, however badly they mispronounce it: *Innaharda, ehna kullina Misryeen! Today, we are all Egyptians.*

Violence is the antithesis of faith. The God who has been revealed to us by the people who escaped from Egypt, and now by the young people who were left behind is a God of non-violent distributive justice. Distributive justice means everyone has enough. Christians keep looking to

the heavens for help, instead of looking inside their hearts, which were made in heaven to begin with. When asked recently why more people don't seem to see God these days, a wise rabbi responded: "They aren't willing to look that low."

I have longed believed that Albert Schweitzer was the greatest Christian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When he was asked once to describe the greatest person alive in the world at that moment, Albert Schweitzer replied: "The greatest person alive in the world at this moment is some unknown individual in some obscure place who, at this hour, has gone in love to be with another person in need."

Our duty is not to see through one another, but to see one another through. We are not supposed to hover a few inches off the ground, tattling on sinners, and raising ourselves up by running other people down. We are supposed to *be in the world* so differently, with such a quiet and unassuming strength that people will get curious by and by as to what it is that we are running on. Organic Christians are like compost. Not necessarily attractive, but very effective.

We don't always have to wrestle the world to the ground and break its arm. Sometimes we just plant seeds and then nourish them by quiet and unassuming acts of civil disobedience. We profess our abhorrence to violence the way some vegetarians profess their abhorrence to meat. We spend our money wisely, not egotistically; we get our sexual act together, not so we can be miserable prudes, but so that we can be worthy of the gift. We love the poor; we don't use them as scapegoats. And in the end, we remember that "civilization, from a heavenly point of view, is nothing but the long, slow process of learning to be kind."

We are salty and luminous, but we are not self-important. And above all, we are not boring, because as Kierkegaard reminded us, boredom is evil; it's a form of death. In 1928, our beloved Church of England changed the wording in the communion service from "lively faith" to "living faith." That was a mistake, because as one Yorkshire churchwarden put it: "Look at our vicar. He's living, but he ain't lively."

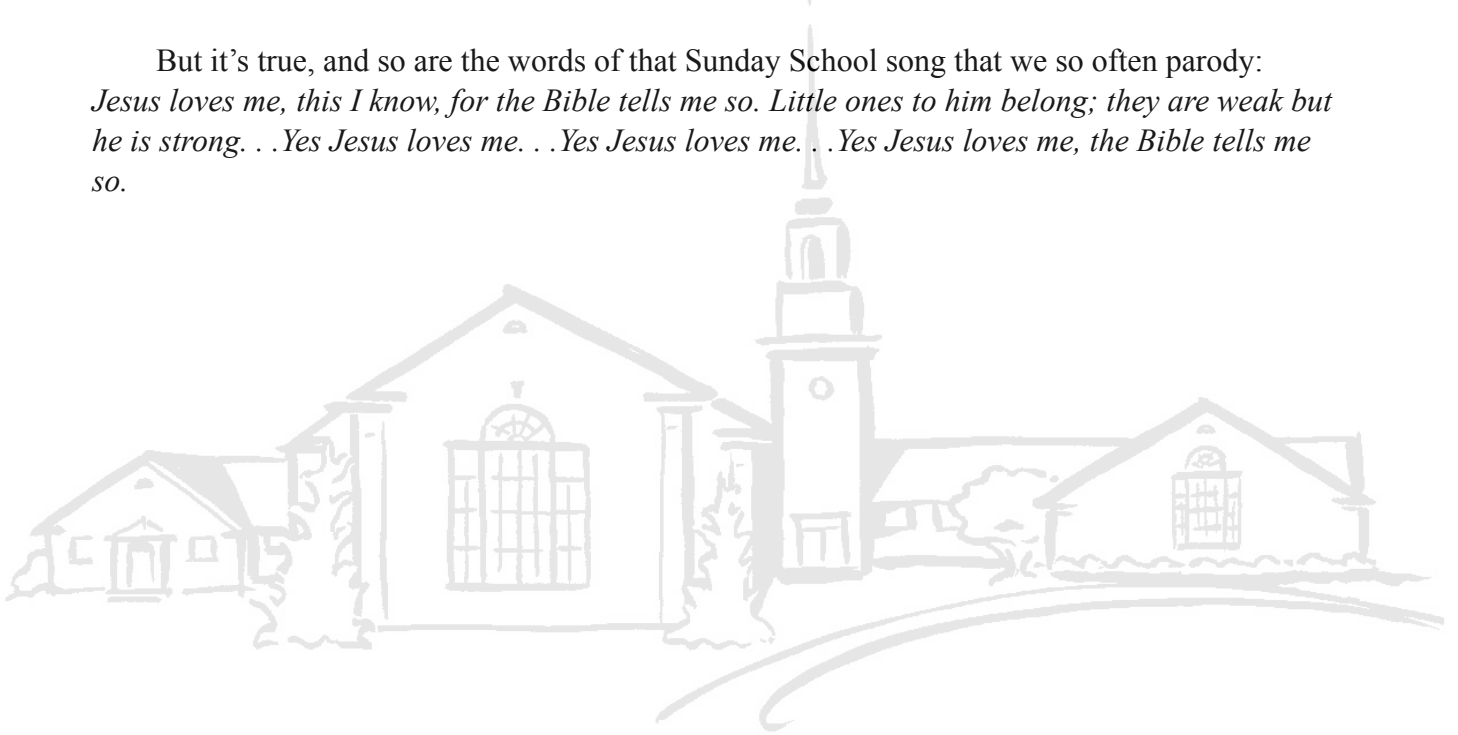
One day, when St. Francis was hoeing his garden, he was asked, "What would you do if you knew you had only one day to live?" "I would keep on hoeing my garden," he replied. I remembered Maya Angelou's wonderful phrase, "To survive is important, but to thrive is elegant."

"You are the light of the world." Dearly beloved, if God so loved this world that he sent the light of the world, his own shining son to brighten our darkness, then let us not fear to carry the torch, even down to the very gates of death itself. Let us comfort the poor, shelter the weak, and with all our might fight for that which is right – because peace is better than war because life is

better than death.

We are not supposed to be on the side of Pharaoh. We are supposed to be on the side of the people. After all, we are salt and light — even if we forget it sometimes. It's true, and how do we know? Because in the words of that old Sunday School song, the Bible tells us so.

But it's true, and so are the words of that Sunday School song that we so often parody:  
*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak but he is strong. . . Yes Jesus loves me. . . Yes Jesus loves me. . . Yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.*



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