

People of Positive Influence

Isaiah 42:5-9 Matthew 5:13-16

13 '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.

14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

This is the word of the Lord!

Since school started I've been thinking about teachers I had over the years, and giving thanks for what they taught, but mostly for who they were as persons and the positive ways they influenced us students. I remember one teacher in elementary school, Mrs. Fischer, who used to tell the class, "Look at all those beautiful brains out there..." "You can do this..."

In many ways this is what Jesus is doing with this teaching, from a very early part of his ministry, just after he has called his first disciples.

This little band of disciples, and God's people throughout the ages along with them, are given an affirmation of their significance and potential, in a very positive statement: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world!

Whitworth University professor Dale Bruner calls this the ordination service of the disciples. Jesus ordains them as his people of positive influence in the world. And it happens before they receive any training!

Because this declaration of their identity is given to them just shortly after Jesus has called them to follow him, not after three years of training and experience. In fact, Jesus hasn't even called all 12 of them yet. Ironically, Matthew, the one who writes this gospel, hasn't been called yet. That happens in chapter 9! And we're only at the beginning of chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel.

These newly called disciples are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. One would think that Jesus would say this at the *end* of his three years with them, as a kind of graduation speech, or a commissioning of them: "Now that you have heard all my teaching, observed my healing ministry, and have experienced a new lifestyle; now that I am about to be sacrificed, and then raised to new life, NOW you are prepared to be salt and light." But it doesn't happen that way.

Jesus knows better. If their time spent with Jesus over the years was a qualifying school, of sorts, to see if they would test into some standard of being good salt and light, they would all fail. And so would we. The disciples showed a lot of human frailty and weakness, even *after* three years with Jesus.

So it's critically important that they understand, right from the start, from the beginning of their call to follow, who they are and what they are called to. What this tells us is that *the call to discipleship is not a call to measure up. It is a call to grow into an identity that is pronounced over us.*

This is why the apostle Paul begins his letters, all of them, by addressing the people of the church he is writing to as "saints." "To the saints in... Corinth, to the saints in Ephesus, to the saints in Rome," etc. In doing that he is *not* saying, for example, "To the saints in Corinth who have it all together and have achieved a high level of good Christian behavior." We know that isn't what he means, because, as soon as he addresses them as saints, he immediately begins to tell them to quit behaving badly! And, most importantly, he goes on to encourage them to *live into* the identity they have as saints and servants and salt and light. The best example of that from Paul is Ephesians 4:1: "*Live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*" Yes, you are saints. God has made you that and makes you that. He has called you that. Now, live into that—into who God has made you to be and become. Being a saint doesn't mean being perfect and having a halo around your head. It means being on a journey, with Jesus, and growing into an identity.

This naming of us as salt and light is not a call to perfection or to some religious performance, but a call to grow into an identity that is pronounced over us. Grace is given, with this pronouncement, before we do anything.

It's one of the reasons we baptize children: a child has an identity and promises pronounced over them, before they are even able to do anything. They are encouraged to live into it, with the help and encouragement of parents and the church. "You are baptized!" is what we tell them. "Here is what God has said about you. As you grow, live into that truth and that promise, that you are God's beloved."

This pronouncement of our identity as salt and light is a grace gift: God starts with us, right here, right now, right where we are. God blesses us and works through us, right here, right now, with all of our weaknesses and shortcomings and failings, and... our all of our strengths and skills and aspirations! God begins with the raw material of our lives, calls us salt and light, and encourages us and shapes us as we grow into that identity over time.

What a grace gift; what an affirmation!

So, people of God at Maplewood, you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world! It's who you are. And it includes all of us, no matter where we

are on the journey or where we have been. Whether we're new to the faith and feel like we don't know much, or whether we have been following Jesus our whole life.

Now, as we receive this affirmation of our identity and live into it, notice that Jesus does not say you are salt *to each other*; you are light *to each other*. Salt does not salt itself. Light does not light itself. We need to emphasize the "of the world" aspect of this identity. God *graces* us, and God *sends* us.

And so, here, we are reminded that the church is at its best when it lives for others outside of itself, not only for each other inside. Even Israel, ancient Israel, was mandated to be a witness to others and not inwardly focused. It's in our Old Testament reading for today from Isaiah 42, which says, "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you (grace!). I have given you as a covenant *to the people*, a light *to the nations*. To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon..." (he's talking about debtor's prison, which is justice for the poor) The reason Israel existed was to be good news people *to and for the world*.

And I believe that the call of God to the church today is to get back to our basic identity and purpose as salt and light *in and for the world*. The great call of

God to the church—in the midst of cultural chaos and change and tweet-storms—is to get back to our basic identity and purpose as salt and light in the world, for the world.

So, we're not salt and light to each other, but to the world. Love each other, yes; bear one another's burdens, yes; speak the truth in love to each other—yes. We do all of that with each other, to build one another up, so we then strengthen each other and affirm our identity as salt and light to the world—we're a more powerful influence because we're united and we're encouraged and equipped.

As we live and grow into this identity as salt and light, I'd like to reflect on one simple but super important observation about salt and light as they relate to our influence in the world, as individuals and as a church. Jesus chose these metaphors carefully so let's work with them for a couple minutes.

And that is: like salt and light, our influence is positive. Our influence is positive. And in saying that, I know that my own internal reaction is, I'm not sure how positive I can be these days. And maybe that is your reaction too. Some days I'm just not feeling it.

I mentioned to someone that our daughter had taken a covid test and tested negative, and she said: “I’m confident I’m negative. But I’ve been negative about a lot of things lately.” Ha! That may be true of many of us! When it comes to our attitude, we may test negative sometimes! Me included.

So this admonition to be people of positive influence may not at first sit well with us or sound very attractive. However, deep down inside we all want to do good and see good happen, and Jesus wants to call forth the good in us. That’s why Jesus gives us this affirmation at the beginning of the gospel. To call for the good.

And in addition to that, as we talk about having a positive influence as salt and light, we need to relieve ourselves of the expectation to be some big bright lamp, and rest in the assurance that this (small candle) is sufficient. We need to give ourselves permission to feel good about the small and simple ways we can let our light shine, and the little bit of salt we can bring to the world around us. After all, a small amount of salt is all that is needed to cause the good effect that salt brings.

With that encouragement, let’s ponder these images of salt and light for a moment.

Think about salt first. What does salt do? Salt *flavors* food, salt *preserves* food. I know, salt can create high blood pressure and it also kills slugs, but I'm pretty sure that is not what Jesus had in mind when he said, "You are the salt of the earth." There is enough high blood pressure these days—sometimes caused by Christians who are too salty!

As ***flavoring***, or seasoning, salt does the positive thing of bringing out the natural flavors in food. Eugene Peterson captures this beautifully in his translation of v. 13 of The Message: "You are to be salt seasoning that brings out the God flavors of this earth." In other words, we see good and truth and beauty, and call it forth; we see where God is at work in the world and point it out and bring it to life. That's salt as flavoring.

As ***preservative*** salt does the positive thing of preventing decay *before it happens*. It's proactive and not reactive. It prevents and preserves. Think of this in terms of our witness. Of not just *reacting* to what we perceive as bad, in the world or in others, but by doing good and perhaps *preventing* it—often times without our knowing that our actions were preventative.

Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil; rather, overcome evil with good." Richard Rohr: "The best criticism of the bad is a practice of the better."

Salt seasons, salt preserves.

How about light? Light *illuminates*, whether reading a book, or driving a car—by day (natural light) or by night (headlights). Light reveals color. Again, as E.P. puts it in v.14: “You are here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world.” Light also gives warmth, light helps living things grow.

Think of all of this in terms of our witness in the world: of bringing out the best, of being a life-giving presence, with life-giving actions.

These are all positive influences of salt and light. And the world *needs* us to be positive right now! The church is a light to the world, not a mirror to the world, reflecting back to it how awful it is. People have enough mirrors in their lives, reflecting back to them their personal problems and struggles. There are also enough mirrors online and on television reflecting back to society all of our social ills. Our world—our neighbors, our community—needs us to be *windows* through which God’s light shines and calls forth goodness and beauty. The church is a light to the world, not a mirror to the world. People need healing, hope & grace.

So, our influence is positive. Jesus did not say, “You are the weed be gone of the world.”

The world *needs* the church, *needs* us to be persons of positive influence, who are learning more and more how to love others well, who are learning how to reconcile and be peacemakers; and how to bless and how to serve.

So, friends, hold your head high, claim your identity as salt and light and live it out at home, and at work, in the grocery store, when you go out for a walk; when you're on Zoom or on the phone. Live into your identity that Jesus pronounces over you. And delight in doing this in small, simple ways.

This isn't cheery optimism that ignores or turns a blind eye to the struggles and injustices around us, or in our country. Being salt and light is actually the best criticism, if you will, and the most realistic solution to what we do see, because it shows a better way. Remember, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better." And remember, "Do not be overcome by evil; rather, overcome evil with good." This is the better way.

So, friends, let us be people of the better way, the way of Jesus, who himself is the true Light of the world. He will show us, and equip us for, this better way.

Come, live in the light #749