

Sermon Series: You Asked For It

“How do I interact with the world?” by Jeff McClain

Matt 5:13-16; Rom 12:1-2

Boone UMC

9/11/16

You Asked For It

- Why church? How read scripture? Handle disagreement? Respond to fear?
- All point to this: How interact with the world?
 - o Inherent tension – How are we to be IN the world but not OF it
 - See the way society thinks, believes, acts, in some ways we want no part in that
 - I don’t want my kids to grow up that way, or my family to spend time that way
 - Not the values I choose to live by
 - o Tempted to withdraw, only hang out with other Christians
 - Tempted to form this safe little bubble where we can control all the inputs and make sure everything is just how we want it to be – positive, encouraging, Christian...
 - o Problem, of course, is that’s not real life. We don’t live in a bubble. We live in the real world. With Christians and non Christians. With people we disagree with.
 - Not everything “Christian” is good, not everything “worldly” is bad
- How are we, as Christians, to engage with the real world?
 - o If we are followers of Jesus, how does that shape our interactions with society, coworkers, neighbors?
 - o How do our beliefs dictate our behavior?
 - o How does Christianity inform our world view?

Tension – God’s kingdom is already not yet – Sermon on Mount – how to see world through that lens

- Citizenship in God’s Kingdom, identity as God’s children more important than national identity, safety and security, rights, personal wellbeing, our ability to control our environment
- Sermon tells us who we are as followers of Christ, and what we’re called to do
 - o Apostle Paul expands on that theme in Ephesians, starting next week
- Hear what Jesus says about our identity and our responsibility as followers of Christ

Matt 5:13-16 NRSV

Matt 5:13 "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 under foot. **14**

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 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. 16 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.

The word of God for the people of God.

You are the salt of the earth

Jesus doesn't say be like salt. He says you are salt. He's telling us our identity and giving us our mission in the world. There's a certain amount of responsibility in Jesus' words here. You are salt.

Expression to mean good person, solid, real, down to earth, very decent

- that's how we interpret that phrase today
- good aim for us – to be good, decent people. But there's more. When Jesus said it to the crowds of people and disciples, it had deeper meaning

Salt uses

- Used for flavor – accentuate flavors around it, bring out best in other ingredients, helps us taste things more intensely than we would without it
- In Jesus' day, used for preservation – kept things from going bad, before refrigeration used to pack meat in salt to extend its life, keep from going bad
- You are the salt of the earth
- What an interesting metaphor for us as Christians – we are called to join God's work to add flavor, to extend life, to help keep the world from going bad

As followers of Christ, as God's children, we are to enrich the lives of those around us, bring out the best in them and in every situation we find ourselves in. And we do so in order that people might see our good works and give glory to God.

This is how we are to be in the world. Nice message. True. But if we dig deeper, Jesus' words are actually stronger than that. You are the salt of the earth. More than a nice word. More than a trite saying we might post online or hang on our office wall. There's more to this word.

Bibles often put subheadings above sections, and usually this section stands alone – salt and light. But looking at what's before and after these verses brings a new level of richness to their meaning.

Context – read v10-12¹

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are you who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed, when people utter evil things against you on my account. Jesus goes from that to “you are the salt of the earth.” Seems like an abrupt transition. What’s the connection? Hold that thought for now.

I’ve been talking with a friend of mine recently about a problem that’s been experiencing for some time now. I have his permission to share this story. He’s serving in a volunteer organization that doesn’t have good leadership. In many ways it’s an unhealthy and even toxic environment. But he’s an optimist, and he’s committed to serving there because he believes in their cause and he wants to see them succeed and thrive. But nearly every suggestion he’s made has been met with resistance. People have questioned his motives. They’ve lied to his face. They’ve lied about him to others in the community. It seems like every time we talk he’s frustrated and hurt by something new. And yet he still shows up and serves, hoping against hope that someday things are going to change.

I’ve been talking with him about this situation for some time now. Very rarely has there been any sign of progress or improvement. Just more heartache. But he sticks with it. Partly because he made a commitment. But also because he hasn’t felt God telling him it’s time to move on yet. He wonders if he’s supposed to be there even though it hurts.

I usually don’t like to tell people what to do. When people come to me for advice I like to ask questions that help them think through decisions. I like to help them see how God might be at work in their lives. I like to help them discern for themselves what God is calling them to do next. But after a number of conversations with my friend, I felt like he just wasn’t seeing what I thought was abundantly clear. So I decided to tell him. I told him to quit. Run away and don’t look back.

That’s the conventional wisdom, after all right? Nothing seems to be happening. You keep getting hurt in the process. You come to me and complain about it, and frankly I’m getting kind of tired of listening! Just quit! It’s not worth it. Move on and share your gifts and passion somewhere else.

That was my advice earlier this week. I told him that and then I went back to preparing my sermon. And I read the section before today's text. *Blessed are you who are persecuted for my sake, blessed are you when people utter all kinds of evil against you... You are the salt of the earth.* And then I came across another way salt was used in Jesus' time.

There are many places in the OT where God's people used salt, none of which I'd really noticed before.² In Exodus, when Moses prepared the incense for the tent of meeting (the place where he met God face to face), God told him to season the incense with salt (Ex 30:34-38). Leviticus 2:13³ gives instructions for priests who offer sacrifices to God: **Lev 2:13** You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." Salt was also used to seal the covenant between God and the succession of priests in Israel (Num 18:19). It also sealed the covenant between God and all the kings of Israel (2 Chron 13:5). So salt was used to seal the covenant bond between God and God's people. It was used to affirm and consecrate the relationship wherein God says "I will be your God and you will be my people." Salt – a valuable commodity – was used during worship in the temple, and it was used for sacrifices. Salt played a prominent role in the life of God's people.

So when the crowd gathered around to hear Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount, they brought with them a rich and meaningful association between salt and worship, salt and God's love, salt and sacrifice. So when they heard Jesus say, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted and when people say evil things against you because of me" it might not have seemed like such a jump to hear him follow that with, "You are the salt of the earth." It was an invitation to walk the same road Jesus was walking – the one that led to the cross.

Following Jesus – being the salt of the earth – IS about bringing out the good in people and situations around us. It's about enriching the flavor of life for God's glory. But it's about much more than that. Following Jesus, being salt and light, is also about sacrifice. It's about giving up what we want. It's about entering into the difficult places that need to be enriched, enhanced, enlivened with God's Spirit – and being willing to stay there, even when it's tough; even when it takes life out of us.

Today is the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. When police officers, fire fighters, first responders, and our military sign up for duty, they sign up to be servants. To make life better for all us. To keep us safe, enforce our laws, and protect us. To help us in time of need. But they also sign up for more. They also sign up to sacrifice, knowing they may die. As so many of them did

² This is from Paul S. Minear in an essay entitled "The Salt of the Earth" from *Interpretation* 51(1):31-41, 1997. Accessed from ATLA

15 years ago today. And as many have in the days since. God bless them. God bless their families and all who mourn today.

Christ's invitation for us to follow him is the same. As the salt of the earth we're invited to serve, but it's also an invitation to sacrifice. This week the Catholic Church officially recognized Mother Teresa as a saint. She spent her life serving the poor in Calcutta, India. The slums of India are not an easy place to be salt and light. She served the poorest of the poor for 60 years, provided homes to orphans and hugs to untouchables. She did this work because she believed it was what God asked of her as a follower of Jesus. When her diaries were published after her death they revealed that she went for decades without feeling close to God. How many of us would have kept walking that road? Especially in that setting? Over a billion people living in extreme poverty. Overwhelming despair. Hopelessness in every direction. Silence from God. And yet she kept being the salt of the earth for those God put in her path. A sign of God's neverending love for us, a life of sacrifice for God's glory.

As I thought this week about salt and sacrifice and reflected on what Jesus is calling us to, and how counter-cultural his ways are and his kingdom is, I came across an article by John Weborg, one of my seminary professors. The piece was called "Scripture Demands More" and his words hit me:⁴

"Some things are never known until they are put into practice. Consider the biblical teachings of loving our neighbors as ourselves, caring for the poor and dispossessed, praying for our enemies, renouncing revenge even when we think revenge is justified. How often do we act as if the teachings of God's will are unwise, pointless, or impossible? How often do we doubt the wisdom of God's grace and love? Yet, when even in our doubt we practice the virtues, we then will begin to hear God, we will come to understand the wisdom of God who gave us his word, and the vindication of God's will becomes clear."

After I read that I realized I needed to call my friend back. I had encouraged him to quit serving in what seems like a helpless, hopeless situation. It's a situation that is sucking the life out of him, and he wonders whether he's doing any good at all. But it's a situation where he feels God has asked him to be salt and light. And God hasn't told him to move on yet. Maybe one day God will. I told my friend I was wrong and that he should keep serving, and I'll do a better job encouraging him. Keep being the salt of the earth whenever he can, however he can, even though it's uncomfortable. Sacrifice is never comfortable.

⁴ http://covenantcompanion.com/2016/09/05/scripture-demands-more/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+covchurch%2Fnews+%28Covenant+Newswire%29

How much more comfortable would it have been for Jesus to never have come to earth? God could have simply ended the world or just declared, "Let there be salvation!" But that's not what God did. God came to earth to be salt and light. Jesus sacrificed himself for us in order to demonstrate God's great love for all humanity. He invites us to do the same so that God's name might be glorified. You are the salt of the earth. Practice being salt! Even when it hurts. Because that's how we discover life in Christ.

As my professor said, "Some things are never known until they are put into practice. Even in our doubt we practice the virtues, and the vindication of God's will becomes clear." May you have the courage to practice, learn, and live God's will for your life. Even when it doesn't make sense by the world's way of doing things. God brought forth salvation from a cross and a tomb. Imagine what God can do with a little salt. Amen.