

“Ancient, Eternal, Elemental”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 5:13-20
July 9, 2017 - Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Our Gospel lesson this morning continues the Sermon on the Mount, immediately following the beatitudes we heard last week. So right after laying out a radically different map of who is blessed, Jesus continues speaking to the crowd with these words. I want to be clear about the language here, so I’m supplying my favorite Southern word — “y’all” — where appropriate, according to Biblical Greek. Listen now for the good news of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew:

“Y’all 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. “Y’all 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 y’all’s light shine before others, so that they may see y’all’s good works and give glory to y’all’s Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell y’all, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell y’all, unless y’all’s righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, y’all will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Y’all are salt. The salt of the earth. Salt, to our modern ears, seems common and cheap and it makes us worry about our blood pressure. But remember that before refrigeration, salt was the great preservative. The word “salary” originates from the Latin, denoting a Roman soldier’s allowance to purchase salt. Salt flows through our biological systems, keeping our nerve impulses transmitting properly and our cells in proper function.. Salt is crucial and life-giving and makes life less mundane when it flavors food.

Y’all are light. The light of the world. And that light can’t be hidden. It can’t be put under a basket. It’s the kind of light that fills the house. It’s the kind of light that shines from the hill. It’s the kind of light that draws attention. Light feeds living things and makes it possible for us to see. Light makes for beauty and brings rhythm to the day. Light allows our food to grow. Light disinfects and casts shadows so we can see our presence on the earth.

Y’all are salt and light. Vital to survival, and to any sort of interesting life worth living. Salt and light, ancient and eternal and elemental on this earth. Y’all give life and flavor it. Y’all are waves and particles and crystals that are basic to this world. Y’all are bountiful and yet irreplaceable and indispensable.

Y'all are salt and light! Jesus said so. He didn't say "y'all *should* be" or "y'all *will* be" or y'all *can* be." He said "y'all *are* the salt of the earth" and "y'all *are* the light of the world." I wonder, Christians, do you believe him? He didn't say "y'all shall be the salt and light until the late twentieth century, when postmodern sensibilities, combined with technological advances, societal shifts, and church scandals will make you less important."

Are those of us who sit downhill, at the feet of Christ, salt and light for God's creation? It can feel like we are irrelevant. It can feel like we've lost control of the narrative and the young people and the cultural influence that at least our slice of Christianity had just a few decades ago. It can feel like we, individual hearers of the Word, cannot do much about the "blessed are" crowd from last week.

There has been much hand-wringing about the future of the Presbyterian Church at the national level. This year, a "Way Forward Commission" has been meeting, charged with figuring out how we do Presbyterianism in a smaller denomination. In the world of the Presbyterian Church (USA), this congregation is an outlier, one of a shrinking minority with kids running around and a thriving music program and engagement with mission locally, nationally, and internationally. But even here, we could get down on ourselves. We need a new roof. The first floor needs new paint. We could wonder if anyone outside our membership would notice if EPC suddenly disappeared.

Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world. The little church of people sitting on that hill listening to Jesus was smaller and less well-funded and less organized than even a gaggle of Presbyterians. And the church of the First Century was filled with people who didn't have two shekels to rub together and who felt pressure from all sides to abandon the faith and conform. It takes a little bit of audacity to meet in some fisherman's house as a tiny upstart faith and feel comfortable saying "We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We are ancient. We are eternal. We are elemental to this earth."

Who, us? Yes, y'all. Y'all are the activity of God in the world. Y'all are not chalk or limestone, but salt. Y'all are not shiny hubcaps or bicycle reflectors, but the very light that God is shining into the world. Ask the A.A. group that meets here five times a week if there's light here. Ask the Young Widowed Grief Support Group that meets here on Tuesday nights if they've encountered salt in Barron Hall. Ask the students at the school we helped build in the Congo, or the kids at the Presbyterian Home for Children, or the men at the Firehouse Shelter if y'all have lost your saltiness or dimmed your light. Ask the Birmingham Islamic Society and the young adults waving from the sidewalks at the Pride Parade if they'd notice if EPC disappeared.

Y'all are light and salt. We are not simply Christ's representatives on earth, holding down the fort until Jesus returns in glory. That's not our job. That would be temporal and prosaic. That would be so terribly boring. No, we are Christ's presence on the earth, for better or worse. We don't have a choice about that. It's not a "should be" or "will be." We are. It's our identity. And it's pivotal that we know what difference that makes.

Being salt and light is not just an interesting, particular way of being in the world. It's not like being the top hat or the shoe or the thimble in Monopoly. Being salt and light is the ultimate way of being in the world. It's a totally different existence, with totally different expectations.

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We hear “righteousness” and it’s tempting to think “rule-following” or “morality.” But I don’t think that’s what Jesus means. Remember that Jesus has redrawn the map here. He’s flipped the script, saying that the poor in spirit are blessed. And while lifting up the lowly, he has also raised the bar. He’s telling the crowd that the world looks differently from how it appears. He’s asking them to share his theological and existential imagination!

He just said that someone who breaks a commandment “will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” We hear “least” — but what if we’re supposed to hear “in the kingdom of heaven” and say “wait, they’d make the cut?” Perhaps engaging with this world through the eyes of God — being salt and light — means raising your expectations of what is possible. Raising them even beyond what the scribes and Pharisees think is possible.

Ask those Youth Group Senior Highs who are on their way to Montreat right now if you’ve taught them that they are salt and light. No, really, it’s okay, they don’t bite. Ask them if they’ve learned something about righteousness from y’all. Every year on Youth Sunday, we hear one of our “kids” tell us how they learned from this group not to judge, but to love. They’ve learned how to show up for someone whose world is crumbling. They’ve learned that the people of God will love them when they’re bratty and sarcastic and ungrateful. They’ve learned discipleship from you salty people. They’ve learned to let their light shine.

This week, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been holding it’s biennial “Big Tent” conference in St. Louis. This is a conglomeration of a bunch of Presbyterian conferences that used to happen separately, back in the days when we were two or three...or four or five times larger than we are today.

At the opening worship service, the preacher was the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA). He has heard the concerns and can bear witness to the fear that the mainline Protestant denominations are shrinking. He hears it from Presbyterians, and he hears it from ecumenical partners in the U.S. and around the world. What will become of the church? How can we save the church?

J. Herbert reminded the crowd that a Presbyterian’s task “is not to save the church but to serve the Lord.” He went on: “We serve the Kingdom of God, not the church... We must become Kingdom people – to put our eyes on the Kingdom and take them off of the church.”

In other words, we are salt and light. When we need to be humbled, we remember that we cannot make salt and light. We can only be what God has made. Two thousand years of wildly imperfect Christians haven’t been able to destroy the church, what makes us so special?

But when we fear that we are merely creatures buzzing around, not making an impact on the messy world around us, let’s taste the sweat on our lips and look to the sun and remember precisely what we are. And then let’s live that eternal life-giving existence, with the Christ-like imagination of the saltiest salt and the brightest light shining through us.