

“Spiritual Health Shows”  
Isaiah 42:5-12; James 3:6-18;  
Psalm 22:23-24, 27-28; Matthew 5:13-16

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I remember when I was young that I would sometimes sit with my grandpa as he reflected back on his life. He had had a pretty simple life in some ways. He had been a plasterer. I remember him talking about different places where he had done a plaster job and how important it was to him to have gotten the plaster on just right. He saw in what he had done a way of being of service to those he was working for. In the midst of that he had provided for a family during the Depression.

Now, as a boy I think I sometimes got a little tired of hearing some of those stories, yet I think what he was doing was a reflection on his own life that let him think about how, in spite of it being sometimes menial work and not billboard kind of stuff, how in it he had found a blessing, how he had received that kind of top notch well-being that we talked about last time. It makes me think about how sometimes in reflection we can see things like the Beatitudes at work. It is as we reflect back on our lives that we begin to see how perhaps even times of the poorness of spirit, that time when we recognize our full dependence on God, as a blessing and how it has led us in places that are wonderful.

Jesus, as he’s moving on here, is not simply asking us to look back, but to look forward and to look at the present. He says, “When you follow me and begin to recognize that you are receiving these kinds of blessings let them be seen.”

I labeled the sermon this morning “Healthy Spirituality Shows” because I think what he’s talking about in the Beatitudes is this relationship we have with God, this healthy spirituality we develop, and its effects. He goes on in these short verses to begin to talk about that. When we begin to follow him and enter into this relationship with God, and when that relationship builds into a much healthier thing than we have, and we begin to notice this healthy spirituality, it shows. Jesus talks about it in a particular way. It’s not that it begins to be a billboard that starts flashing. It talks about us being the salt of the earth.

Now, that’s an interesting phrase. We know what salt is, but why does he say “salt of the earth?” Maybe it’s just that salt comes from the earth. But I would guess there’s a little bit more to it. There’s a contrast when you think of the word “earth.” Earth is the solid stuff as compared to the ocean, to the sea, that place of chaos. It’s also a place in contrast to heaven. We bring something of God’s creative solidness; we bring that kind of salt to life. We bring something of God’s created solidness to the world around us.

Of course, we can think about salt in a variety of ways. Salt was something that preserved. Salt was valuable. In Jesus time, it wasn’t quite as ubiquitous as it is for us. It’s pretty easy for us to get a hold of salt. It hasn’t always been that way. Salt was sometimes used to create a covenant, like a handshake. They would share salt, was the way of saying. Salt also adds flavor. So as we think about salt, we can think that it

had a variety of uses. So when he's asking us to be the salt of the earth, there's some sense that all those uses are part of that. But he goes on to say be a flavor. We'll talk about that more later. But we know what salt is and we can shake it out and we know what it does. There's a way in which hearing that from Jesus suggests that there's something that we do in the world around us as we let our healthy spirituality show. We flavor the world. So that was one way he talked about it.

He also said be light to the world. Perhaps this idea of following Christ is not easy to simply put one way. It's not a one dimensional kind of thing. It's not flat. It's got multiple dimensions. So he uses different ways of talking about being disciples, of allowing this healthy spirituality to grow and be who we are and show.

So he talks about being light to the world, to the nations, something the Israelites were supposed to have done as we read in Isaiah. Be a light. It's interesting as we think about the idea of being light. For us, going into a place of darkness is not nearly what it used to be. Today when we go into a dark room, we turn on a light. When we go to a dark place, we take a flashlight. We have a way of bring the light with us. If we lived in Palestine in the time of Jesus, we wouldn't have nearly those kinds of options. If we went outside at night we couldn't just shine a flashlight into the shadows to make sure nothing was there. Candles were best, and lamps did OK, but they had limited ability to shine in particular directions. We have to remember how much the darkness constricted life. When the light went away, there weren't a lot of options. So as we think about dark and light, the metaphor really works, and it works even better for somebody who struggled with the darkness more than we have.

Jesus is suggesting that as we follow him we become light in that metaphorical way of bringing the goodness of God to the world around us, to the lives around us. Think about, first of all, how incredible what he's saying here is. There are two things that are incredible about it to me. One is that sometimes it feels like it should be all about worship. It should all be about paying attention to God. It should all be what we call the vertical dimension. And yet, he is inviting us in following him, in loving God, to care about the horizontal. In fact to be ones who are bringing into that realm salt and light. For me, it's just an incredible thing. It's not just about paying attention to God. God says in multiple ways that when we pay attention to the world around us and when we bring goodness to that, we are paying attention to God. It's something that involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 25 that if you give one of the least of these a drink of water, you were doing it to Jesus. There's an incredible way in which God doesn't just care about us. In fact the second commandment Jesus offers right after love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength is to love your neighbors as yourselves. As Jesus has just gone through a preview of what it means to become a disciple and how there are these blessings and these wonderful results, he doesn't just stay there and enjoy them. Immediately, that should be part of the world we live in. It should bring a flavor to it.

It's kind of an interesting thing for me. When I was in Lake City, I used to play volleyball. We had a wonderful group of mostly guys who would come to play volleyball every week together. This was a small community, so they all knew I was the Pastor at the Presbyterian Church. I could tell when I walked in the door, I heard their language change. I didn't have to say a word. I guess I brought a flavor to it. That's what I'm getting at. I didn't even try to do that, but because they knew who I was, that flavor came with me.

It's incredible that God works through us to change the world, to set us as beacons to help us shine the light. A couple of things I want to say about that. One is, recognize that when he's talking about salt, he's not saying that we come in and over salt something. In fact, we read in James that if the water is salty, it's brackish and not useable. We bring flavor. We don't destroy the dish with too much salt. The same thing, I think, goes for light.

I have a salt shaker here. The nice thing about this particular salt shaker, according to my wife, who is a nutritionist, is that there's only one hole, so you can only get a little bit of salt out at a time because really, it's to add flavor, it's not to overpower. The other thing that's nice about this salt shaker is that if I hold it upside down, it looks like a light bulb. Perhaps that's the idea behind being light. We bring ideas. We bring moments into the lives around us.

There are some times where bringing light isn't just the idea. It may be the moment we sit with somebody and hear what they have to say. Think about the times of darkness in your own life. What is the light that enters in? Sometimes it's when a friend just comes to be present and all of a sudden there's light where there was darkness. Sometimes we come into a situation where we shed light on that which somebody is trying to do that is not good, and it's hard. There are times when it's easy to want to put our proverbial bushel basket over our light so that it won't be seen because we're afraid of how somebody will see us.

We talked last week about being poor in spirit as recognizing our full dependence on God. There are times when it doesn't feel comfortable sharing that. In fact it feels to me that sometimes in our lives as followers of Christ it is in the very moment of sharing our own vulnerabilities, our own real needs and struggles, that we bring light. There were moments in groups where we have had a nice little conversation and it's been pretty light, and then somebody begins talking about something real and a new light is shed on the conversation. A new light enters in, and when we as a group recognize that, we become a new group and we can go to depths we never expected. The light of God enters in, sometimes in our very weakness.

The invitation Jesus is giving us is to recognize, as we learn from him, as we enter into this path of discipleship, as we allow God to build in us a healthy spirituality, a relationship with God, we can let it show. At times we have to work at letting it show, and not put the bushel basket over us.

So I would encourage you in this coming week to think about that. Where are those places that I don't want to show my dependence on God, that I don't want to show the blessing, that I don't want to be the light that might bring something to light?

Jesus invites us to be the salt of the earth, the light in the darkness. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, sometimes it feels incredible the way Jesus takes us and involves us in all of these blessings and then turns things into something we are to do, that the world might know of you through the good works we can do, born out of gentleness, through the wisdom you give us. Lord, it often sounds wonderful to think about being light or being flavor until we enter into those situations where we recognize how hard it is. Lord, continue to encourage us, guide us, strengthen us for this journey. Remind us that we are dependent on you and that it is our relationship with you, the way you value and love us, that enables us to be that light and to offer that flavor. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.