

**“Blessed to Be a Blessing”**  
**Genesis 12:1-4; Matthew 5:1-16**  
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**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**  
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Who am I? That’s the question that began our journey this month back on November 4<sup>th</sup>. I am a child of God, made in the image of God, loved beyond comprehension. To embody that truth we used a mirror as a metaphor, to see God’s reflection in ourselves and in one another. The next week we considered the question a second time, “Who am I?” I am broken. That image of God within me gets distorted by sin, so I am a mess. Stones representing those forces that bring brokenness to our lives shattered the mirror. Yet we affirmed the truth that God meets us in the mess, loving us even still. Last week we considered the question a third time, “Who am I?” I am redeemed. God not only meets us in the mess, God transforms us, healing us, redeeming us. The broken pieces of mirror were brought back together through God’s love embodied on the cross, representing the new life God brings to us and the new creation God wills for the world, for all things hold together in Christ.

Today is our final Sunday in this series. Given our identity as God’s children, broken by sin, redeemed by Christ, now what? To hear what this means for our lives we turn to Matthew 5, to the opening of Jesus’ first sermon to his disciples, the Sermon on the Mount. Listen for God’s word to us this day from Matthew 5: 1-16:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

*‘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.*

*‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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 your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. That's how Jesus begins his first sermon to his first disciples; by blessing them, not once, not twice, but nine times. For years I read the Beatitudes as a to do list, a command to be more poor in spirit, more humble and meek, purer in heart, more mindful of those who mourn, and of those who are persecuted for standing up for what is right. But there is not a single imperative verb in that list. Jesus begins his ministry by blessing those who followed him up that mountain. Every single one of them were included somewhere in those nine blessings. Beloved, so are we. Blessed are you.

But that is not where Jesus' sermon ends. That's just the beginning. How often do various expressions of Christianity end with me being blessed? The gospel of prosperity certainly does. The goal is my financial blessing. Everything ends there. Other expressions of Christianity end at my salvation, getting my ticket punched to go to heaven when I die. The goal is simply for me to gain eternal life, for me to be saved. In that I'm blessed. That's what some expressions of Christianity are all about. Had this sermon series ended last week, we would have fallen into the same trap. Who am I? I am a child of God, broken yet redeemed. Blessed. Is that all there is to this? Is the gospel simply about being blessed?

No. Jesus did not stop there, and neither should we. After nine declarations of blessing, Jesus shifts to imperatives, to commands that grow out of two simple metaphors: salt and light. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. These are two more answers to the question, "Who am I?" You are salt. You are light. The "you's" here are not singular, they are all plural. If the gospel was in southern English, it would be "Y'all are salt. Y'all are light. Scholar Eugene Boring writes of these images, "With these ... metaphors of salt and light, ... Jesus strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private."<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to be salt? Salt had many uses in the ancient world. Of course, it was a seasoning. It was also used as a preservative and to purify. In addition, it was used in many religious offerings and as a catalyst to help fire ovens. "You are the salt of the earth," says Jesus. You are the seasoning; you are the preservative to keep rot from setting in; you are the offering, giving yourselves to honor God; you are the catalyst to get things fired up. That's what it means to be salt.

What does it mean to be light? This is a particular kind of light. We are not strobe lights, blinking rapidly to create distortion and confusion. We are not spotlights shooting beams into the air to draw attention to ourselves. We are not interrogation lights shining in the face of the accused. According to Jesus, we are more like a candle on a lamp stand. As light, we shine to offer warmth, to illumine the darkness, offering hope in the midst of the gloom of despair.

Salt and light do not exist for their own sake. As my friend Shannon Kershner put it: "You don't just eat salt. You don't cure salt. You don't preserve salt. It is only valuable in its application to other things."<sup>2</sup> So it is with the church. Our value is in our application, to be salt **of the earth; for the earth**, seasoning, purifying, catalyzing.

So too it is with light. Light does not exist for itself, but to illumine what is already there. We are the light **of the word, for the world**. The church is to be light shining in the darkness, light that illumines

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Kershner. Paper on Matthew 5 for "The Well," Chapel Hill, 2015.

things to see them as they truly are; to illumine the human condition, to shine on those the world ignores; to reveal what lies in the shadows. Inasmuch as the church shines the light of this truth, we are the light of the world.

How is the Church of Jesus Christ doing in this capacity? Is the church salt for the earth? Are we light for the world? If the church is salt and light, if we exist not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world, wouldn't you think that the places where the church is the strongest would be filled with flavor and basking in light, defined by love and mercy and reconciliation and blessing?

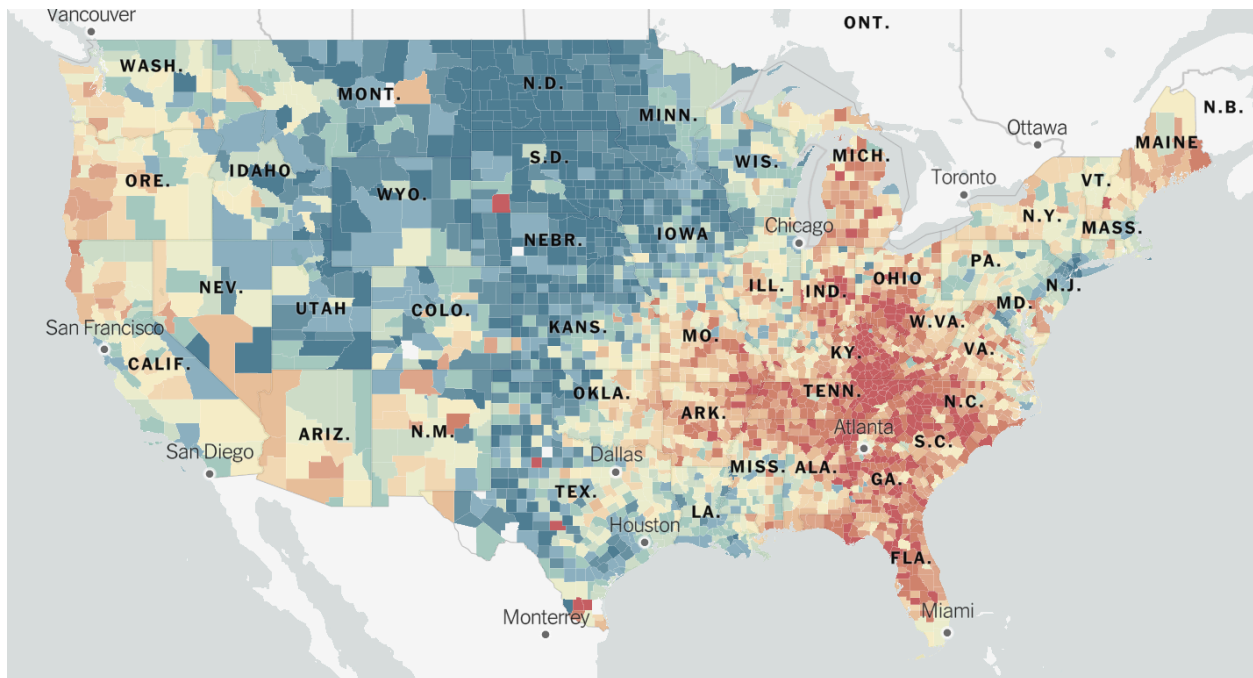
The Pew Forum conducted a survey in 2016 asking the question, "How religious is your state?"<sup>3</sup> Religiosity was measured by worship attendance, frequency of prayer, and belief in God. Alabama and Mississippi tied for the top spot. Following them, the top ten were rounded out by:

1. Alabama	77%
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3. Tennessee	73%
4. Louisiana	71%
5. Arkansas	70%
5. South Carolina	70%
7. West Virginia	69%
8. Georgia	66%
8. Oklahoma	66%
10. North Carolina	65%

These are the most religious, the most Christian states in the nation. Last month, the New York Times published a national poverty map. Guess what? It is very difficult to tell the difference between a map that shows the most religious states and a map that indicates the poorest states. The deeper the red, the worse the poverty. Blue represents relative prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state/?state=alabama>



How is the church salt of the earth and light for the world in these contexts? How is it that the most religious states are also among the poorest and vice versa? What do we make of this? “Blessed are the poor,” says Jesus. They certainly are more religious. But if the church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, how is it that the most Christian states have the worst poverty, which means the worst schools, the worst housing, the worst healthcare, and the hungriest people? How can the church as the light of the world illumine these issues where we live, how can we let things be seen as they are and cast a vision for who God calls us to be as a “city on a hill?”

This Thanksgiving weekend, I am reminded of one of my ancestors, John Winthrop. He came to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, ten years after the Plymouth Pilgrims. Onboard his ship “The Arabella,” he offered a famous speech, “A Model of Christian Charity.” Winthrop warned his fellow colonist of the potential dangers awaiting their endeavor. At the close of his speech, he said,

*Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God, for this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our owne rejoyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>4</sup>*

Winthrop’s speech concludes with a reference to Matthew 5. He says, “... for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us.” We so often hear this allusion to the “City on a Hill” in political speeches, but it seems we forget the call to work together to advance the common good, the call to be salt and light.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm> (the speech is all over the web, and it’s pretty accurate)

Whether or not they abided by Winthrop's challenge is a matter of historical debate. Indigenous people certainly did not experience them that way. Those like Anne Hutchinson, who were brutally persecuted by the clergy would say they failed in this regard. But the challenge was there from the very beginning; from the beginnings of the colonies that would become the United States; from the beginnings of the church of Jesus Christ, set upon that mount to hear Jesus' first sermon.

Today the church continues to face this challenge. How do we take that amazing love God has for us and share it with the world? How do we put the blessings of our lives to work in blessing the lives of others? How can we be salt to catalyze the good of our community? How can we reflect the light of God's love to illumine the shadows of our world?

Through our discernment process our congregation has identified three strategic priorities. We will follow Jesus by cultivating community, crossing divides, and changing lives. Within the Outreach Ministry of the church, we are focusing in on two major efforts: education and affordable housing. Last month, we took a huge step forward on the housing front.

For the past ten years, through our partnerships with Crossroads and Habitat for Humanity, we've been working to build affordable housing in Grier Heights. This has all been single family housing providing opportunity for home ownership. In recent years the need for housing for those living at 30% of the area median income, under \$25,000 a year for a family of four, who cannot afford home ownership has been lifted up. Charlotte has a shortage of roughly 30,000 units of such housing. In September, our Session made a commitment to allocate the vast majority of our available outreach funds to help develop such housing in Grier Heights. In partnership with Crossroads, Antioch Baptist Church and Grier Heights Presbyterian Church, we are providing a zero percent loan of almost \$1 million to purchase available land in Grier Heights, and to develop at least 70 units of housing for people living on very low incomes. This is one small step in what we hope will be a life changing ministry and a catalyst to create many more such developments in Grier Heights.

"Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you," says the Lord. But Jesus does not stop there, and neither should we. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are sent to live out God's love for this world. "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.



Beloved, let your light so shine that all may see your good work and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Myers Park Presbyterian Church, let us shine.