

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, February 5, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Matthew 5:13-20 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

As I was praying over this week's passage, I remembered a quote that is commonly read at high school and college commencements. The quote is often attributed to South African president and antiapartheid activist Nelson Mandela, but Mandela did not write it. Instead, it was written by American author and New Age spiritual leader Marianne Williamson in her 1992 self-help book, *A Return to Love*.<sup>1</sup> You may have heard the quote before; it goes like this:

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the World. There is nothing enlightening about shrinking, so that other people won't feel unsure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us."*

It's an inspiring piece of writing. And at first glance, it appears to echo the same themes as our Scripture lesson. "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. A city on a hill cannot be hid." Believe in yourself. Be proud of who God has made you. Use your inner light to change the world.

But Jesus and Williamson have very different theologies. Williamson promotes the power of self-love. Her book is full of empowering self-affirmations like the "deepest fear" passage I just read. Williamson argues that all the world's problems – violence, greed, pain, etc. – are products of our deep fear and insecurities. If we just believe in ourselves fully, then we can set ourselves and the world free from these intractable problems.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/7/30/20699833/marianne-williamson-our-deepest-fear-nelson-mandela-return-to-love>

The difference between the Gospel and Williamson's philosophy is that she puts the individual at the center of the world and the solution to the world's problems in our individual hands. The expectation is that if we fix ourselves through self-love, we can save the world. But the Gospel is clear that apart from God's grace, we are not capable of fixing ourselves. We may bear the image – the glory – of God inside us, but we do not restore that image through our own power; God restores it! And the piece of the divine that I carry inside me is just that – a piece, a glimpse of God's total glory. It takes all of us together to fully show who God is and what God's kin-dom looks like.

When Jesus says "*You* are the light of the world" he is not addressing an individual. He is addressing his disciples and all the people who have gathered to listen to him teach. The "*you*" is plural. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is describing the new community that will be formed in his name. Not only is the "*you*" plural, but the sentence is also indicative. Jesus is not commanding; he is describing. He is not ordering us to be salt and light; he is telling us that we already *are*.

Last week we read the Beatitudes, the first part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, Jesus assures us that we are blessed – but not when we achieve the world's standard of happiness (i.e. wealth, power, success). No, we are blessed when we embody God's kin-dom values – values like humility, mercy, and peace. These are not blessings we strive to achieve, but blessings we already possess through God's grace. Likewise, in this week's passage Jesus is not setting a standard of achievement. We do not strive to be salt and light; we already are by God's grace! Jesus is asking us to accept and live out that reality as his disciples.

So, what does it mean to be salt?

Salt is a flavor enhancer and a preservative. It promotes growth – farmers used to salt their fields to improve the mineral content of the soil so their crops would produce a better yield. In the ancient world, salt symbolized purity and wisdom. But above all, salt makes people thirsty. Disciples of Jesus enhance the world by embracing and embodying God's kin-dom values. And when we embody those values, we make others thirsty for life with God.

What does it mean to be light?

Light illuminates the darkness. It helps people find their way. It lets things be seen as they are. Disciples illuminate the world by refracting God's kingdom light in the darkness. That darkness includes the forces of violence, oppression, injustice, suffering, and despair we encounter in our world. But crucially, that darkness also exists inside each of us. In order for God's light to be seen, we must be willing to go where the darkness is – even if that is our own hearts.

When Jesus says, "You are salt; you are light," he is saying to his followers – to us – "Be what you are." And what we are is evangelists for the kingdom of God. The natural property of salt is enhancing flavor and preserving food; the natural property of light is illuminating darkness. And the natural property of disciples is sharing the Good News. We are evangelists for Jesus whether we consciously claim to be or not. "A city on a hill cannot be hid." As followers of Jesus, we live exposed. Our witness always matters. We represent Jesus everywhere and to everyone – friends, family, neighbors, and strangers. Jesus says that when salt loses its saltiness it is thrown out. No one sees a light that is hid under a basket. When we ignore our witness, we stop being salt and light.

To be good evangelists, good representatives of Jesus, we must practice humility. I have pointed out before that the word 'righteous' is conflated with 'self-righteous' – a word that conjures negative associations like 'arrogant,' 'proud,' and 'judgmental.' But to be righteous in the Bible is to seek to follow the will of God. Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. In other words, our desire to demonstrate God's will must be more than a display of piety. It must be more than acting out religion for religion's sake. It must be about more than our self-image as Christians. Salt and light do not exist for their own sake; they exist to enhance and illuminate. Likewise, our righteousness – our desire for the will of God – must enhance and illuminate not only our lives, but the lives of our family, friends, neighbors, and even the strangers we meet.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). We are only salt and light insofar as we walking in the way of Jesus. Our witness must demonstrate the same humility that Jesus demonstrated. He was God, and yet he purposefully

sought out and ministered to people who were powerless or socially unacceptable in his time: the sick and disabled, women and children, tax collectors and ‘sinners.’

Our humble witness should look the same. Just like Jesus, we are called to disorder the status quo. We are called to value the dispossessed, to care for those who have suffered loss, to love mercy and do justice and practice peace and stand up for what we believe. Who are the powerless and socially unacceptable where we live, work, and socialize? Who are the powerless and socially unacceptable on the margins of this church? We are not salt and light so that others will see our good works and say, “What a great church! Five stars. Maybe I’ll come to worship next Sunday.” No, we are salt and light so that the people who think there is no place for them in the kin-dom of God will see our good works and say, “That’s who Jesus is!”

Remember what God said through his Prophet Isaiah: *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard”* (Isa 58:6-8).

This has always been God’s definition of right religion, handed down to us through the Law and the Prophets. God desires a world built upon mercy and justice, where the weakest among us are protected, lifted up, and offered fullness of life. God calls God’s people to extend the blessings of his kin-dom to that end. And God sent His Son not to overturn the Law, but to fulfill it by revealing through his life and ministry the weightier matters by which religion is judged.

Next week we will study how Jesus reveals those weightier matters. But for now, Jesus encourages us to be what we are. Be the salt of the earth, be a light to the world, be exceedingly righteous – so others will see our good works and give glory to God. Be what we are so those who most need it will catch a glimpse of the kin-dom. Be what we are so every person knows they have a seat at God’s Table.

Amen.