

Sharing Salt, Reflecting Light

Matthew 5:13-20

Denomination Day Sermon, 2017

Several years ago, some members of Nashville Presbytery put on a theatrical production called “Light Along the Cumberland” and eventually there were two different productions with that name. The first was short lived, a good musical version that told basically the early story of Tennessee. The second version, which ran for several more years, culminated with two productions during the meeting of General Assembly in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 2000. It is the story that most Cumberland Presbyterians know: the story of Finis Ewing, Samuel McAdow, Samuel King, and others—the story of how they founded the denomination of which we are a part. When the newer version was finished, there was a lot of discussion about using the same name “Light Along the Cumberland” because of the possible confusion. But, in the end, it was chosen because it was important to use the word “Light.”

The scripture for today is a part of what is usually called the Sermon on the Mount. Most people, even if they are not Christians, have heard many of the words in the discourse. Jesus starts out by talking about the “blessed” of God: the poor in spirit, the meek, and the merciful. Along the way in this discourse that covers three long chapters, Jesus talks about birds of the air, the lilies of the field, a narrow gate, trees bearing fruit, wolves in sheep's clothing, and the necessity of building your house on a rock. This discourse contains a lot of beautiful and profound words. It is no wonder that Matthew writes at the end that *“the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority.”*

All these words were directed to his followers, who already had a relationship with God; who already had, as some might say today, a clue about what Jesus was saying. It was directed to those who would learn from him, who would come to believe in him as the son of God, and who would someday perhaps even imitate him. But this was no beginner course. It was kind of like an early Program of Alternate Studies course. It was sort of, “Okay, if I accept what you are saying, what do I do next?”

To this, Jesus says, you are salt and light. What a great compliment this is! You don't get to *be* salt and light—you *are* salt and light. You don't even have to achieve this saltiness and light. That is what you *are*. Being a child of God makes you that way, through the power of the Holy Spirit. But why are we called salt and light?

We know all about salt, don't we? It is necessary to flavor our food, and the salt Jesus was talking about was necessary to flavor our lives. One man said he had a friend who did not like salt, so the friend wished that Jesus had used the illustration of a jalapeno pepper. He said the jalapeno was used to flavor food, but if it lost its zest, it could only be used as a green pepper on a pizza. Maybe this would be a better illustration to modern people like us.

We know all about light, too don't we? We have all been in blackout areas where there was virtually no light, and we were probably scared. The Bible uses the metaphor of light in a similar way. Without light, we cannot find our way around easily. In fact, light was so necessary that the calling forth of light was the first act of God in the story of creation. Afterwards, God said that the light was good, and from there went on with the rest of the process of creation. In the first chapter of John's gospel, we read, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not*

understood it.” In the Bible, generally speaking, when you read of light, you know it is talking of something good.

You are salt to give flavor to the world. You are light so that you may “*let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” In other words, we are to give flavor and light to the world so we might live the life of an apostle of Christ—to be like Christ.

What drove the early leaders of what was to become the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was their great desire to share the gospel with all, to reflect the light of Jesus. They took seriously what Jesus called his early followers in the scripture for today, “*You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.*” They answered the great calling to take Christ’s light to the frontier.

Fast forward 200+ years: Cumberland Presbyterian ministers and members are *still* giving light and flavor to Jesus’ gospel in many ways. Look at some of the innovative ministries that were featured at the 186th General Assembly: *Burrito Ministries* which focus on feeding the homeless; Nashville Presbytery’s *Sacred Sparks Ministry* led by Rev. Lisa Cook, which not only helps to feed the homeless, but helps them with a lot of other tasks, like helping them to wash their clothes; *Still Waters*, headed up by Rev. Joyce Merritt, which, ministers to single parent families in ways similar to those used by the Cumberland Presbyterian Children’s Home, but in Middle Tennessee; and there are a whole lot of other ministries being done by persons in other Cumberland Presbyterian churches.

The theme of the 2016 General Assembly in 2016 “Let’s go outside...where Jesus is.” This was an invitation to go from our churches and meet people where they are. The aforementioned ministries were highlighted during a worship service of General Assembly.

In almost every church I know, I have also seen the “traditional” ministries done well. There are food drives, worship, Sunday School, VBS, church camps, and a whole lot of other things being done by those who are sharing the salt and reflecting the light of God. Cumberland Presbyterians are also continuing to shine in our long-time, traditional ministries through institutions like the Children's Home, Bethel University, Memphis Theological Seminary and the Program of Alternate Studies.

Throughout our denomination’s history, we have always been on the frontier. When we came into being in 1810, Kentucky and Tennessee were the most southwestern states of the United States. Alabama and Mississippi were territories, and Florida was still under the rule of Spain. The United States had owned Louisiana for six years, and still didn’t know what treasures that purchase held on the other side of the Mississippi River.

So, as the pioneers moved west and southwest and even north, Cumberland Presbyterians were there, on the frontier, sharing salt and reflecting light. Our first foreign mission was to Native Americans who lived in north Mississippi, in what was then Indian Territory. They met the Choctaws, with whom they would have a very long relationship in Oklahoma Indian Territory and beyond, and they established a school for the Chickasaw boys to learn the ways of the white man—farming and such. The school lasted for twelve years or so, until the Chickasaws moved west.

Cumberland Presbyterians went to Texas, and to virtually the rest of the United States, moving at the speed of the pioneers. Ministers would go into an area that wasn’t very “churched,” hold a long revival, and gather converts into a group to study the Bible and eventually many of these groups grew to become a church. Then these churches became the ones sharing salt, and reflecting the light of Jesus Christ.

This spirit is still with us. From a mission field that basically consisted of Colombia, Japan, and Hong Kong in 1980, to Cumberland Presbyterians now sharing salt and reflecting the light of Jesus in places like China, Australia, Haiti, Brazil, and others, especially in Africa and Southeast Asia.

That brings us to us, who are sitting here 2,000 years after Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You would not be here today if you had not already confronted the question, "Why am I here?" The first question of the old catechism answers the question, "We are here to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." We are not here to just live out our days in this world. We have a purpose. We are to be salt and light. Peter reminds both believers in his time, and also us, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" (1 Peter 2:9)

We are the people of God. We are salt and light. We are to share our salt and reflect the light of Jesus Christ. Sounds good. Sounds scary too. How are we to do this? How are we to share salt and reflect light into a world that needs both?

God had a plan for that, too. Our *Confession of Faith* says, "God acted redemptively in Jesus Christ because of the sins of the world and continues in the same intent in the Holy Spirit to call every person to repentance and faith." (4.01) It also reminds us that "while it is possible for all to be saved with it [the Holy Spirit], none can be saved without it." (4.03)

We are the people of God. We have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to build up the Church. Through the Holy Spirit, like our spiritual ancestors in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, we have the strength to face new frontiers, and we have the faith to begin new missions. Through the Holy Spirit, we are salt and light. Amen.