

“Snuffed Out?”

Matthew 5:13-20

February 10, 2019

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“You are the light of the world....”

Matthew 5:13

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may we serve as the light and the salt of your Son Jesus Christ: preserve in us the wonders of your grace and the love of your kingdom that our righteousness may reveal peace and truth. Amen.

Sermon

There is an old Chinese Proverb that says “May you live in interesting times!” An understatement if there ever was one!

How to make sense of our world at this moment in history is a task in and of itself: The pieces and parts of the puzzle are coming together and moving apart all at the same time. Like a kaleidoscope, it is always changing shape and color.

To say the least, it is interesting, a reminder, I suppose, that every particular age is interesting. There are always challenges that are unique to specific situations. Just when we think history is going this way, something happens and it goes another way, or sideways, or backwards, or in circles, or up or down. We never know what may happen, as there is a great deal of uncertainty.

Since the Enlightenment, though, we have had the assumption that as a human race we have arrived at the pinnacle of progress. We have achieved greatness in so many fields of endeavor that we now can control our fate, but only to be reminded that we can so quickly descend into conflict and chaos.

Indeed, my friend Andrew Walker of King’s College in London says that we are living through a new dark age. He says that the Enlightenment, or the age of reason, was not so much about the light of reason as the “darkening” of reason,

especially with respect to racism, anti-Semitism, poverty, environmental crises, and globalism, to name a few. He is not the only one to make such comments.¹

However, as Christians, we would probably want to qualify such statements, for we would want to consider every age without the light of Christ a dark age. There have always been times and places without the Light. Our age is not new in that sense. So dark age or not, we need the light to see.

Salt and Light

In our passage today, from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lifts up two images of how disciples are to be known in the world. The one image is light, the other is salt. Followers of Christ are to be known as salt and light. Salt to flavor. Light to see, to show.

Perhaps we may remember singing the song “This Little Light of Mine” in Vacation Bible School. I know we sing it quite often in preschool. It is a song that is easy to sing, and, if not at times, to sentimentalize.

Actually, however, it is a song that was sung in many African American churches during the civil rights movement: persons sang the song as they were preparing to go out into the world: This little light of mine, I’m goin’ let it shine. Don’t let Satan, snuf it out, I am going to let it shine.

The words, of course, are based on this passage of scripture in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus says “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. So let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:15-16).

That’s the sermon in a nutshell: we are to be light-bearing followers of Jesus, lampstands in a dark room, not kept in a closet.

Many on the mountain in the crowd that day listening would have understood this. They would have heard Jesus echoing the words of prophet Isaiah: that God called Israel to be the light of world (Isaiah 42:6). Israel was to be the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were walking in the dark to find their way. That was Israel’s mission: to be light.

¹ Andrew Walker, *Deep Church Rising: The Third Schism and the Recovery of Orthodoxy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishing, 2014).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is also wanting the people who follow him to be light. That may sound like an audacious claim, right? for isn't Jesus the light of the world (John 1:4-13, John 8:12, John 12:46)? In John's Gospel, Jesus is light of the world: "The light has come into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:13).

But now, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." Does this mean that Jesus is now out of the picture?

Well, if you call yourself a Christian, no! Jesus' light and your light come from the same source. Jesus' calling and your calling come from God. Jesus' mission and your mission are grounded in the kingdom. There is to be continuity between what Jesus did and what we do. Because Jesus is the Light, we can let our light shine. This is not a contradiction; rather, it is a kingdom strategy.

Kingdom Strategy

In other words, Jesus is not abandoning the sharp words of the law and the prophets of Israel that sparked Israel to action (Matthew 5:20). Jesus did not come to do away with them, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). What Jesus is proposing is how we are to live in the world and in relation to others.

That's why the key word in the passage here is the *personal pronoun you*.

Jesus' kingdom strategy is a relational strategy, a personal strategy: You are. Blessed are *you!* Right? Remember. You are salt, and you are to flavor to what is dull around you. You are light and you are to show others the way the Father. And because you are light and salt, you can help those who are hurting or grieving, and you can go about clothing the naked and visiting the imprisoned. Because you are light you can walk alongside and listen and understand and work with others.

So think relationally: think of all the persons (and places) in own community and how you are to be salt and light. Think of families, of businesses, of neighborhoods That's where *you* are to be light that penetrates darkness, or salt that preserves flavor. Remember kingdom strategy: that word *you!*

But already I can hear it: "But Jesus, don't you really want us to do these things behind the scenes and out of sight? I mean, won't others think that we are doing things to gain recognition? Don't we need to be careful about coming across as "It's all about us, or it's all about me!"

Good question! But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying.

Rather, first of all, he is talking in the plural you, so he is saying, “If you all sign up with me, you are already going to be visible; you are going to be in the public eye. You can’t avoid it.”

People are going to see us when we are worshipping. People are probably going to see us when we are serving. We don’t need to be ashamed that, or hide our light and work under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:15). Instead, we simply need to be who we already are as servants and followers of Jesus.

Second, the light Jesus is talking about ultimately comes from God, not us. We are not the source of the light. God is! The light that shines ultimately comes from the One who is light. To make this all about us is to turn this into a strategy for self-promotion. It is what the disciples James and John tried to do in gaining the best seats in the kingdom (Mark 10:25-35).

It’s also what happened to the people of Israel when they were acting like all the other nations, with their politics, and squabbles, and divisions.

When we try make it about us, we lose whatever is distinctive about being a Christian. We lose whatever unique flavor we are to have. We end up blending into the crowd, not making a difference.

It is why I also think that when we go about saying that we are not worthy to serve as light or salt, we can also diminish Jesus’ kingdom work, for Jesus’ life and light are what make us worthy. It’s through Jesus’ righteousness that we become righteous (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Go back to the Beatitudes: “Blessed are you, poor in spirit; blessed are you, who are suffering.” Remember that such God blessed living comes about because of who God is and what God has done. We are blessed and worthy because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us and that relationship in us.

But again, I can already hear: “But I can’t even keep my own light lit. How in the world do I serve as a lampstand to someone else when I am constantly needing light too?”

Jesus as Light of the World

To which Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. *There is enough light for everyone.* It is not about thinking there is not enough light. Rather, there is so much light that what we need to do is to bring it into focus – whether in a relationship

that needs to be healed, or a neighborhood that needs to be helped, or with a friend who needs to be supported. We need to bring that light into focus.

The problem is not about thinking there is not enough light. *The problem is that we are have this tendency to think that God can't use us to share that light.* And nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus himself says it: "You are the light of the world. And because you are you can! That's the mission."

So let your light shine before others, friends, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Don't hide it. Don't let Satan snuff it out! Simply let it shine!

Amen.