

When the ASPCA runs its commercials, I have to change the channel.

I'm serious. When Sarah McLachlan breaks into song and they start showing the dogs behind chain-link fencing and follow up with abused kittens, I'm done for.

You would have to have a heart of stone to sit through those commercials. I've often wondered if it's an effective ad campaign if others switch the channel immediately as well. But I have to assume that it opens pocketbooks if they keep running it.

I sort of feel the same way about the Christian Children's Fund. Do you remember their ads? They have a different name right now, but all you have to do is say those words and I'm immediately transported to Sally Struthers and Angela Lansbury narrating a script that showed pitiable children and told me that I had the power to save a life, right then. Of course, there are so many examples of these types of real-life situations that cry out for help.

A group of us were on Iona this summer for a few days, and each morning and night there is worship in the Abbey. It's a magnificent experience, if you ever have the chance to do it, you should go. We worshipped in the ninth century church and on our first night there, the resident members of the community had a service for healing for the world. They listed the areas of humanitarian disaster around the world and told us what the refugees carried out with them.

(Being the abbey, between the humanitarian disasters there was a bouncy little arrangement of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen*... it made it a bit hard to stay focused.)

But all around the world, there are, of course, humanitarian disasters. Through the years I have referenced them in sermons – Syria, Darfur, South Sudan, Somalia... the list goes

on and on. U2 lead singer Bono once declared famously that the twentieth century would be remembered for three things: the war on terror, the digital revolution, and this is the one that hurts: for the world standing by with watering cans while a whole continent went down in flames.

He was, of course, referring to the very humanitarian crises I just referenced.

And of course, there's plenty to deal with nearby.

I got an e-mail on Tuesday from another Presbyterian addressed to local clergy inviting me to come and protest a bill in the Georgia House that would allow concealed weapons to be carried, among other places, into houses of worship.

I love you all dearly, and if you have differing opinions from me on gun control, that's fine, but I don't want any of you coming here packing heat. Guns in churches is a little too wild-west for me.

What a strange world we live in sometimes.

Sometimes it is wonderful. Sometimes it is terrible.

Tom Long wrote a commentary on Matthew's Gospel narrative a number of years back and we had lunch not too long after he had completed it, and he shared with me that as he studied Matthew and immersed himself in his world, that a recurring theme kept rising to the top of his study. He said it was as if Matthew were saying to the world, "We don't have to live this way."

We don't have to live this way... we have a choice between destruction and building.

We have a choice between kindness and cruelty. We have a choice between generosity and hardness.

We have a choice. We don't have to live this way.

Matthew seems to think the same thing.

Matthew is distinctive as a gospel narrative because he treats Jesus, among other ways, as the new Moses.

For what is Moses known? Moses is known for bringing the covenant from God to the Israelites that showed them the way to live.

In God's covenant with the Israelites, they were shown a way of goodness, a way of light, and life, and goodwill.

That is what God wills for all creation and for humankind.

When you see harshness or destruction, elitism or corruption, 'isms and phobias, you can be sure that is not what God wills for humankind.

And so Moses came bearing the covenant from God with the way God's people were to live in the world – as a "Light to the nations," God said.

And so when Jesus climbs up on the mountaintop to deliver his sermon to his disciples, he comes as a new Moses with a new covenant, except that it is awfully similar to the old covenant.

"You are the salt of the earth," he says.

What a strange statement.

At a glance it sounds like Jesus is concerned with the pH balance of the earth. I don't know much about chemistry, but salt is the medium between acid and base.

I like this quote from Stanley Saunders of Columbia Seminary,

"Salt can be used to despoil the earth, but in its more common, daily applications, it serves as an indispensable preservative, an agent of purification and sacrifice, and as seasoning. In each case, salt permeates and alters that which it touches. The phrase, 'If

salt has lost its taste,' literally speaks of salt becoming 'dumb,' or 'foolish,' that is, no longer able to fulfill its purpose... Jesus claim is not that the community ought to be salty some of the time, but that 'You! You are salt!'"¹

In order to get the pH balance in the world that God wants, God doesn't call us to be disciples on an as-needed basis, some of the time, but rather, all of the time. Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth."

You!

Me!

Salt.

Light.

As Drew was preaching last Sunday of God's call on our lives, I found myself chuckling as Dana Hughes said to me, "God chooses you," because I couldn't help but think, "Poor God. Such a terrible judge of character."

God has been choosing disciples from the get-go that don't seem very appropriate or perhaps very effective. God has the strangest tactic for getting the pH balance that God wants in the world by picking such incredibly flawed folks to call out as salt and light.

I wish I could claim to be a resident of the city on the hill, but from time to time, I have to acknowledge that I am not up to the task.

You would have to be a super hero to do it all.

I got one of those day brightening e-mails just the other morning. You know the kind I'm talking about – they don't really have any action items in them, or a question or anything,

¹ Stanley Saunders, Preaching the Gospel of Matthew. W/JKP, Louisville, 2010. P36

but they just someone thinking of you – even at arms length – and sending along a little something fun.

Well this one read, “No one expects you to save the world. Otherwise you would have been born wearing a cape and tights. Just do the best you can.”

I got a little bit tickled – I don’t own a cape or tights. It’s not my business if you do. But just as I was getting really attached to this e-mail as the perfect illustration for what we’re about as church – you know, “We don’t have to save the world, just do the best we can,” I realized it wasn’t right.

God does want us to save the world – to participate in the redemptive work of Jesus in spreading the good news in real and tangible and physical ways. Not by doing the best we can, being a little salty now and then, but by being the salt of salvation ourselves.

That’s a tall order, and it is exactly what Jesus is leading into as he continues his sermon on the mount.

(That, by the way, is what we’re reading from, the Sermon on the Mount. It is in chapters 5-7 of Matthew.)

As Jesus is preaching the sermon on the mount he admonishes his followers not to settle, not to give up, not to think that anything less than the salvation of the world is the goal of God’s redemption of creation.

Indeed, as Jesus preaches his sermon, he takes the Law of Moses, the code by which God’s people were instructed to be light to the ancient world and he intensifies the demands of it. Where what Moses said might have stopped shy of reaching the redemption of the world, Jesus pushes past and brings a new vision, a deeper vision of God’s shalom for the world –that it might be marked by wholeness and healing.

Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses – and do you remember what the original Moses did before he brought his people through the Wilderness and brought the Law and Sinai and lead his people to the edge of the promised land?

He lead them from bondage into freedom. That is what Moses did.

And so does Jesus lead us from bondage into freedom.

We don't have to live this way.

And you are salt.

Let me ask you a question. When you think of church and our calling to be Jesus' disciples in the world, do you think of what you get out of it?

Or, do you think of what you are giving to the world?

I was so proud of the families who were able to come to the church this Saturday and participate in Jesus' work in the world. We started with a devotion, and then we did work for the Presbyterian Church – we participated with Presbyterians from all over the United States and put together school kits.

Then we worked on preparing a meal for Journey. We made fruit salad and regular salad and this morning, they cooked dessert and the meal. If you don't know Journey you should; it is a wonderful ministry – our own Bill Smith works there – that assists men in moving from homelessness to housing. So we worked to help to house folks who are in homelessness.

Then we worked on making coin banks for Children's Hospital that we'll collect as well.

Then we made sandwiches.

And then we went over to Intown to stock the shelves with food donations.

We were doing God's work that morning. Children were learning about what God calls us to do and be – salt and light.

We are called to the saving work of reconciliation in the world, but I want to relieve you of one burden. We are not ourselves the savior.

No, no cape and tights, but we do have a savior.

Jesus came to lead us to freedom, to lead us to freedom from all of the false expectation that we can be removed somehow, one from the other.

No.

We are salt and light.

We are the means by which the good news of peace and hope is shared. We are the means by which the myriad places of pain I referenced at the start of this sermon are healed.

You are salt and light. You are a healer. You make a difference. You, living in Jesus Christ, are the bearer of all of God's endless gifts to the hurt of the world. But you do not do it alone. Jesus is with you. Jesus is with us as we are salt and light.

Yesterday, Melinda shared this story with the children and their families, and I'd like to share it with you.

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake, a coal-mouse asked a dove.

“Nothing more than nothing, was the answer.

“In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story, the coal-mouse said. “I sat on the branch of fir, close to the trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a raging blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence.

Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch – nothing more than nothing, as you say – the branch broke off.”

Having said this, the coal-mouse flew away.

The dove thought about the story for awhile and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is one person's gift still needed for justice to come about in the world.”²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Worship for Life: Unit 12: Offering. ©Logos Productions, Inc. P34