

A Peculiar People  
Matthew 5:13-20  
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*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Matthew 5:14*

Around this time every four years, I find myself growing a bit wistful, as I consider the life I once intended to lead. There is both video evidence and a written record, in third-grade scrawl, that one of my earliest chosen professions was, you guessed it, President of the United States. I imagine that having this ambition as an eight year-old does not make one that unusual, but what may set me apart is the gusto with which I pursued it. I distinctly remember having to tell my parents, so that my teacher would not, that I had been sent into the hall for ten minutes as punishment for arguing too passionately the relative merits of Ross Perot’s tax plan and for interrupting those with whom I disagreed.

Despite all the help I could offer him, Ross Perot lost the election—my first of many political defeats. But my interest in the political world continued to be strong and I arrived as a freshman in college with an only slightly revised version of that vocational goal.

The changes that resulted in my enrolling at Columbia Seminary four years later were gradual but steady. The most important of them was a growing awareness of my intense and enthusiastic love for the church. My initial sense of call to ministry came as a realization that the Christian community, at its best, can be the most compelling and vital force for good in the world. More than any corporation, governmental agency, or non-profit organization, the church has the ability to change the world.

The passage just read from Matthew’s gospel is one part of the most well-known and oft-repeated sermon ever preached, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. I have always imagined it exactly the way that it appeared in the picture depicting it in my children’s bible. Jesus standing on the mountaintop, high above an immense and innumerable crowd of people. A kind of mix between the opening scene of Disney’s “The Lion King” and a Billy Graham stadium crusade. So you can imagine my surprise when I read Matthew’s depiction of the sermon and found that the reason he climbs the mountain is to get away from those great crowds of people. There is no large crowd for Jesus to stand before on the mountaintop. In fact, in the picture that Matthew paints Jesus is not even standing. He sits down and his disciples come to him. His new disciples, our first ancestors in faith, are the congregation to which Jesus preaches this sermon. This is a sermon, not for the whole world, but for the community of faith.

And we should listen closely to what Jesus says to those who will carry his gospel into the world: “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” Jesus gives his followers a message of hope that is dependent upon their living up to the high calling they have been given.

It is an affirmation and a plea for action.

It is a promise and a command.

It is a blessed assurance and a charge to keep.

It is a statement of what the church is what it is called by God to do.

And I can think of no more important words for the church of Jesus Christ here and now than these words from Jesus.

I do not have to explain to you that we live in a difficult time for the Christian community. We live in what many call a post-Christian or even post-religious nation. Most congregations are declining in both membership and energy. The mainline denominations of which we are a part no longer hold the power and influence that they did early in the Twentieth Century, when the New York Times used to publish Harry Emerson Fosdick’s sermons each week—can you imagine that? The church is ailing from decades of internal struggle over questions of theology and biblical interpretation. The church is weakened by centuries of division and conflict. Ours are difficult days for the church of Jesus Christ.

The response of many in our culture, in our city and our nation, has been to call it quits. To stay away from church altogether. To join the ranks of the Sunday brunch brigade. Others have continued to be involved in the church but have become what we might call undercover Christians. You know the type: “I’m a Christian, but it’s not that big a deal. I’m not a fanatic. I don’t even go to church every Sunday.” Every time I hear those phrase, or any of their rhetorical relatives, I cringe a bit. If faithful Christian believers have become embarrassed to confess their faith and live it out in the world, then the future of the church is indeed bleak.

But the Biblical witness and my own experience of the church point to something else, to another possibility.

Consider the passage read from Deuteronomy this morning, a plea to the Hebrew people to remember who they are. The temptation that they will face as they enter the Promised Land will be to claim complete credit for their triumphant entry into Canaan. The temptation will be to forget that it was God who led them out of Egypt, God who parted the Red Sea, God who provided streams in the dessert and nourishment in a barren land. Moses’ words in Deuteronomy stand as a constant corrective to self-congratulation. It was not because you were more numerous and powerful that you were chosen by God; it was only because the Lord loved you, and don’t you forget it. And yet the chosenness of the people is all that matters. It ensures that they will have what it takes to be a blessing to all nations. The faithfulness **of God** (not the fleeting faith of the people) is to be the bulwark on which the community of faith is built.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the command of Jesus for his followers to be salt and light in the world is not for the purpose of self-aggrandizement, rather we are to be light-bearers to the world so that the world might see our way in the world, and give glory to God. The church is not in the business of self-promotion, but of pointing beyond itself to the relentless activity of God in the world. The church wasn't even our idea. This peculiar gathering of diverse persons is a notion that could only have been formed in the heart and mind of God.

We must admit that we Christians are a peculiar people. Our movement began that way, far from the houses of power in ancient Rome or the religious establishment in Jerusalem—in a land called Nazareth, where an ordinary human being began to proclaim that God, with all divine power and otherness, was closing the distance that separated us from others, ourselves, and our God. The early church was peculiar in its insistence on living out the odd teachings of its Lord. Enemy love, strength through service, gaining by giving. Peculiar indeed, and yet driven by something deeper and more powerful than those who claimed their authority from military power or political influence. These peculiar people owed allegiance primarily and wholly to the God who gave them life and the Lord who called them to serve others. It was a different way of seeing the world. It still is.

Two weeks ago, at the Men of Morningside's monthly Theology on Tap program, we had a spirited conversation about Christian Fundamentalism. At the end of the evening, I invited the men to consider the question: what are the fundamentals of your faith? What are those aspects of your belief system that you could never compromise? After a moment to think through the question, I asked for volunteers to share their fundamentals. What emerged from the group was a stunning communal affirmation of faith. The responses were profound and deeply personal. The room was full of salt and light that the world so acutely needs. One of the final answers given was this one: "I believe that God is still active in the world." No phrase could have better summarized my theology in that moment. Here was a group of thirty men, who could otherwise be described as very normal, sharing such peculiar ideas, beliefs that did not come from the surrounding culture but from their faith in something bigger and more significant. The light in the room was so bright I had to shield my eyes. I left that evening invigorated about the potential of the church in the world today.

After church today, in the Parlor, we will have the opportunity to hear from Bill Bolling, who is the founder and executive director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. A few weeks ago, I attended a breakfast at which he spoke. In a time of economic crisis, staggering unemployment, dire predictions of hunger and homelessness, and much anxiety about the future, Bill said something quite peculiar. He said, "this is a great time to be in the church." He explained that people all around the country are reexamining priorities and becoming introspective about their lives. "And we in the faith community have what people most need and what they are most searching for now."<sup>1</sup>

Salt and light. Flavor and vision. What people most need in these troubled times.

It is time, brothers and sisters. It is time for believers in this country to stand together and be the Body of Christ in the world. It is time to open the doors of the church wide enough so that all feel welcomed and indispensable. It is time to walk out those doors into the world in acts of justice, mercy, and love that shed light and scatter salt. It is time for us to live up to the high calling that we have been given.

I thank God that our time is now. Our time to witness to a God who is larger than any four walls, any theology or denomination, any nation or race, any gender or sexual orientation, any political party or ideology. Our time to show the world the power of unity. Our time to be the church in and for the world, salt and light. I cannot tell you how important people of faith are in the world right now. We live in a world that is crying out for hope and vision. A world that longs for peculiar people, who stand firm in faith and proclaim the belief that only God can save us.

We cannot be saved by military power and force.  
We cannot be saved by consumerist mentality or economic security.  
We cannot be saved by fences or gates that keep others out.  
We cannot be saved by hoarding what is ours and refusing to see the needs of others  
We cannot be saved by stubborn refusal to change or accept what is new.  
We cannot be saved by nationalist allegiances that trump religious faith.  
We cannot be saved by government rescue plans or bailouts  
We cannot even be saved by our selves.

To be a Christian, to be a person who trusts in God above all else, is to hold on to the antiquated and unsophisticated belief that human beings are not in total control of the world. And it is that belief that frees us to joyful service and abundant life.

What we are called to is not easy in our day. It has never been easy. It involves deep trust in that which is larger and more significant than ourselves. It involves confessing our sinfulness and our participation in a sinful world. It involves relying on one another and admitting that we cannot make it alone. It involves standing courageously in the face of injustice, corruption, and despair and proclaiming a new and different word. It will take all the faith we can muster and all the passion we can devote. But I can think of nothing more worthy of our energy, nothing more deserving of our life's dedication.

You are the light of the world. Come, peculiar people of God. Come, church of Jesus Christ. This is no time to hide away. Now is the time to shine brightly for all the world to see.

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<sup>i</sup> I am grateful to Bill Bolling for these words of hope, which I first heard him deliver on October 16, 2008 at the Regional Council of Churches Pastor's Breakfast.