

**Matthew 5:13-20** <sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. <sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. <sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:13-20

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“Salt, Light, and High Blood Pressure”

Rev. Amy Terhune

This week, Brad and I continued a practice that has become something of a tradition in our marriage. Every year, around the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, we sit down and watch Bill Murray’s delightful comedy “Groundhog Day”. Now, if you haven’t seen it, I’m not going to feel too terribly guilty about spoiling it – it came out in 1993, so you’ve had 30 years, after all. But since there’s kids in the congregation who haven’t had 30 years, I won’t give away the ending. Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, a somewhat cynical and self-obsessed weatherman who travels to Punxsutawney, PA on February 2<sup>nd</sup> in order to cover the annual Groundhog’s Day festivities, and finds himself caught in a time loop where he relives February 2<sup>nd</sup> over and over and over again. At first, he thinks he’s crazy. When he finally realizes this is happening, he goes a little crazy, does what he wants, eats what he wants, says what he wants knowing there’s no consequences. But that gets old, and so he starts using the time to try to woo his producer, played by Andie McDowell. And each day, he learns something else about her, tries to correct mistakes, all in the hopes of ending the day with her, but each night, the evening ends with a slap to the face and her storming off. Eventually, he begins to despair and tries to kill himself by every possible means, and every morning, he wakes up just the same. And he grows resigned to the never-ending cycle. He’s doomed to live Groundhog’s Day over and over again for eternity. What do you do when all you’ve got is today. No consequences, but also no future. Interestingly, that is when Phil Connors begins to notice things, and to use the time to do things he never bothered with before. He reads great literature, he learns piano, and he discovers the stories of the people in the diner and the hotel and the community. And he collects a list of chores: to catch the kid falling out the tree, change the tire for the older ladies at the intersection, make sure the homeless guy gets a hot meal, and on it goes. And while the date never changes, Phil Connors changes – his outlook, his priorities, his values, his character. And so he begins to better his world.

Which leads us to this morning’s lesson. Jesus says “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” You are supposed to have an impact on the world around you. A positive, life-giving, Christ-like impact. Which may seem a bit dubious, given the Jesus we meet in the lesson this morning. The Jesus who says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” Which may leave us scratching our heads because

that doesn't sound much like the Jesus we know. Love, grace, salvation—that's the Jesus we know. Doesn't Jesus spend a whole lot of time arguing with and chastising the scribes and Pharisees for focusing too heavily on laws and rules and not enough on compassion and justice? Isn't Jesus known for working on the Sabbath and eating without observing purity laws and associating with folks the law warns us against? Yes! And we applaud him for it, too. We like that he turns law on its head. We love to watch him get the better of those Sadducees in an argument. So how can he possibly fulfill law when he constantly clashes with it? Ah, there's the rub.

We're not the first to ask that question. In order to grapple with this, we need to understand Matthew. Remember that the gospel writers each had a particular slant, a lens through which they viewed the world. John was the philosopher. He wrote much later than the other three and was primarily concerned with articulating theological concepts. Mark wrote first, and he wrote fast, in order to get the story down on paper concisely and capture the essentials. Both Matthew and Luke were looking at Mark as they labored to record the story. Luke was a doctor and a gentile, and his stories record a lot of Jesus' interactions with gentiles and women and other marginalized folks.

But Matthew—Matthew was a good Jew, and he's writing to a group of Jews who have professed Jesus as the Messiah. His whole manuscript is laden with Jewish images, peppered liberally with explanations of how each and every event fulfills what various prophets said long ago. Matthew's gospel divides very neatly into 5 sections that beautifully parallel Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And it's vital we understand this. Because Matthew's community at that time was still very much in the process of defining itself. Bill Ritter explains it well when he writes, "The Hebrew people saw the law as a great gift. Rather than crushing the human spirit, they saw the law as reviving it ... lifting it from the morass of a life devoid of guidance.... [from "Don't Kill the Umpire" by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] But Kosher rules are being waived for non-Jews, circumcision isn't required anymore, and the temple won't let them worship there, won't accept their sacrifices, initiates persecution and censure. Their identity is in shambles. There were many who criticized the way that Jesus seemed to undermine the defining, life-giving, God-given Law of Torah. Who are they now? Matthew records Jesus' answer.

I came, not to abolish, but to fulfill. The Law is still valid. It still must be taught, studied, lived. You are still God's covenant people. That hasn't changed. Just because God widens the circle to include those whose practices are different does not mean that the way you have lived and understood the world for centuries is suddenly invalid. It isn't. The law has always been fundamentally about connecting with God. It's about relationship. You want to know who you are: I'll tell you.

You are God's people in the world. You are salt. You are light. Those are identity statements. You are. Not you are becoming salt and light; or you will be salt and light; or you might be salt and light someday if you get it right. No. You are salt. You are light. Translation: You have work to do, a purpose to fulfill. You are necessary. And they were. And we are.

Salt has gotten a bad rap in today's world because too much of it can exacerbate cardiac conditions. To be fair, the amount of salt in a microwavable dinner, a box of mac 'n' cheese, or even a can of chicken noodle soup is scandalous—a result of massive over-processing and the denaturalizing of food. We've also got handy little tools called refrigerators. Neither of those things were true in Jesus' day, and so "salt was an extremely valuable commodity. They would have been appalled by the idea of spreading salt on the road to deal with ice. It'd would literally be like paving the streets with gold. They could use salt like cash. Roman soldiers were paid part of their salary in salt. In fact, the word "salary" is a derivative of the Latin word for salt. Another word we so often hear and use in the church also has its root in the Latin word for salt. That word is "salvation"—to be saved. That's what salt does, it preserves things, saves them. And salvation comes when we claim our identity as saved followers of Jesus Christ. We are salt

because we are His. We are commissioned to continue His saving work. [adapted from “The Difference Is You” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] Salt may be bad for cardiac health, but it’s vital to spiritual health.

“Recently, ecologists at the University of Washington found that willow trees transmit a warning to other willows from as far away as two hundred feet. When caterpillars are attacking, the trees emit a chemical signal that travels on the wind. This enables distant trees to prepare their protection—phenol in the leaves—which is distasteful to the caterpillars. This advance warning of an attack amazes scientists: one individual tree has the ability to behave in a way that benefits the whole species. [Melanie Brown, Ph.D., *Attaining Personal Greatness*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987); as used in “Good Reasons For Not Cheating” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] I think that’s what it means to be salt of the earth—to be one individual seizing an opportunity to benefit everyone.

You are salt. You are light. Light today is getting a bad rap, too. Ask anyone who studies the stars or the sky for a living and they’ll tell you all about the evils of “light pollution!” The blazing of our cities and urban sprawl is slowly cutting us off from the universe beyond our atmosphere. And everywhere in society, the harsh glare of the spotlight highlights the lavish, the decadent, the glitz and glamor of human stardom. We have learned how to use lights to imprison and starve the soul.

“But in the ancient world, light, too was extremely valuable. Because of the horrendous heat of ancient Palestine, most homes were made of mud bricks and had only one or two small windows. The inside of the homes were kept cooler that way. But they were also dark. One lamp—most often a bowl of oil with a wick floating in it—was kept to light the home. [adapted from “Turn On The Lights!” by Dr. Bill Bouknight, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

You and I are called to be light – to be what God can use to bring sight, vision, insight, and hopefulness in the world. Thus, to be salt and light is to give a public dimension to spirituality. Some people find that very uncomfortable. There is a mistaken assumption out there that our faith is a private thing, a matter of the heart, and not something that has any place in policy-making, decision-making, or dream-making. Jesus would disagree. Light must shine out. Its very nature is to be visible. This doesn’t mean Jesus is suddenly justifying a pompous display of religious piety. It means that if the love of God lives within us, our very nature will be to engage in life-saving, light-sharing work. It will be what we do. But even more, it will be who we are by our very nature.

Which, as my colleague and friend Dr. Bill Ritter would say, “brings me to the need for a grace-full exit. Every time I talk about a God who might conceivably expect something – let alone demand something – of us, some of you begin to squirm. I think it's performance anxiety. "Don't tell us about that God," you say. "Tell us about the graceful God ... the merciful God ... the God who forgives and forgives, and then forgives some more!"

“And I will... keep telling you, that is. But I also suspect that somewhere, deep inside, all of us want to face the force of God's expectations. We want to be taken seriously. Like Phil Connors, we want our days to have meaning beyond ourselves. We want to feel that our work, our decisions, our choices – even our failings – matter at the highest level, and might, occasionally, leave a positive mark on the day.

“I’ll let Rabbi Harold Kushner put a wrap on this with one of his rather telling remembrances:

“My grandfather was a house painter in Lithuania, eking out a modest living. But in addition to his public life as a painter, he had a secret identity. My grandfather was one of God's agents on earth, maintaining literacy and kindness in a sea of ignorance and cruelty. His days, his every act, became important, because he believed it mattered to God what he ate ... where he went ... what he read ... how he earned and spent his money ... how he respected his wife ... how he treated his children ... and how he acknowledged his neighbors. That sense of having to live up to God's standards redeemed my grandfather's life from anonymity and insignificance. And it can do the same for us. [4 ¶s adapted here from “Don't Kill the Umpire” by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] Amen.