

Jan Moody
February 9, 2014

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

One In Christ

Jesus is continuing to speak to a crowd of people that includes his newly recruited followers. I invite you to imagine yourself on the hillside hearing Jesus deliver this message. What thoughts, what emotions do his words stir in you?

“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 under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 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.

Let us pray:

God, Challenge and enlighten us as we study your word. Shine new understanding and renew our call to serve. Amen

I first encountered this passage as a song in the musical *Godspell*. The tune was catchy and I can still hum a few bars. In the 1973 movie version the text is translated into a modern urban landscape. The followers of Jesus are portrayed as young people who after hearing John Baptist's cry to prepare the way of the Lord immediately drop what they are doing and shed all remnants of their city life to go where Jesus leads them. While singing *You Are the Light of the World*, Jesus and his young rag-tag followers are on a ferry in the New York Harbor. Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty can be seen in the distance as Jesus and his crew dance and sing their way through chores on deck. Jesus is portrayed as a fun, gentle task master. The message I remember from my teenage years was that Jesus welcomes all and offers new life.

Fast forward several decades and I find myself reexamining these verses in the context of Jesus giving his followers both a wonderful gift and a commission to serve. This passage follows the Beatitudes that names the poor and meek as those who are blessed. Jesus now asserts that the “least of these” are not only especially **beloved** by God but are called to **shine** in the world. We can only imagine how empowering these words were to Jesus' newly recruited disciples. Jesus, the master teacher, uses familiar images to illustrate his message and to unpack God's plan for the world. He proclaims: “You are the salt of the earth”!

Why salt? A primary function of salt in Biblical times, as it is today, is its use as a seasoning. Salt has the potential of flavoring and enhancing the taste of food. Recently in the food section of the *Washington Post*, an entire article was devoted to salt. I especially liked the quote from chemistry professor Robert L. Cook who claims salt is the most precious food in his house, the only natural rock intentionally consumed by our species that has the “magic ability” to “enhance other flavors”.

Jesus affirms that his followers are God's precious resource for carrying out God's work in the

world. His first disciples then, and you and me now, are essential in the Kingdom of God. We are called to serve as partners in Christ's ministry. Eugene Petersen in the Message provides this remix or paraphrase of the text: We are here to be “salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth”

And Jesus does not stop there. The one who the Gospel of John identifies as the true light which enlightens everyone stood before his followers and said, “you are the light of the world”. What a compliment! What an affirmation! What a call to action!

Charles James Cook in his commentary on this passage writes:

“Jesus encourages his followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. The light is the light of the gospel, and it draws all people to its warmth and radiance. This mission has been primary, from the very beginning, throughout every age. Archbishop William Temple is often quoted as saying, “The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” In order for the light to be seen, we must be willing to go where the darkness exists, to engage and walk through it, so that, in time, the light can overcome it.”

The early church was well aware of the challenges of serving as light in the midst of darkness. The writer of Ephesians encourages the church in Ephesus to confront differences and redefine what it means to be included in the household of God. Through Christ, old divisions are broken down. The charge to the early church is still a rallying and wake up call for the church today. God's Spirit continues demolishing old walls to summon in new light and awareness. Sue Burns, current moderator of the Warner Church PW, recently co-authored an article in *Presbyterians Today* that highlights the groundbreaking work of the program Sisters Stand and Walk Together. One of the primary goals of the program is to explore ways of welcoming Presbyterian sisters emigrating from other countries. The program promotes increased awareness of ways to bridge cultures and build leaders of every race and gender for justice. In our Presbytery, the program has evolved in the past three years as a vehicle for broadening the circle of sisters from different congregations and examining through workshops and community building gatherings ways to identify what “the other” means for each person. The women have embraced a “radical welcome” that intentionally and honestly works to overcome prejudices and stereotypes. The women confess that though the work is not always easy the reward is well worth the effort and faith in action initiatives have emerged in response to issues of common concern.

Response to climate change is another way that the church today is recognizing an issue of common concern. Warner youth recently helped with a service project that literally provided new light to neighbors in Washington D.C. They joined with the Interfaith Youth for Climate Justice to help with a light bulb swap campaign. In exchange for old light bulbs, new, energy efficient light bulbs were provided to residents in Columbia Heights. The Interfaith Youth for Climate Justice is committed to engage in activities that promote faith in action. Their mission statement includes a vision to dissolve and alleviate the unequal burdens created by climate change and to open doors for youth of different faith traditions to join together to make the world a better place. Multicultural and interfaith gatherings such as these, provide fresh insight and new glimpses of God's vision for a peaceable kingdom.

Christ's charge to his first disciples continues to guide and connect his 21st century followers to our God given purpose. So.... in what other ways are we called to serve as light-bearers in the world

today? Recently in a Sunday school class I asked the youth to give examples of how Warner Church serves as light both within the church body and to the outside community. The compassion of Stephen Ministers caring for members and the deacons serving the homeless women of Rainbow Place were just two of the examples that were lifted. I invite you to consider other ways that the church is charged to do God's work in the world. Through our unity in Christ we are empowered to do so much more than we on our own can imagine! Let us embrace the challenge. The text from our first hymn reminds us:

“Not in the dark of building confining, not in some heaven light years away: here in this place the new light is shining; now is the kingdom and now is the day.”

And all God's children say Amen!

“What it Really means to 'salt to taste'”, by Bonnie S. Benwick, Washington Post, Feb. 4, 2014
The Message Paraphrase of the Bible in Contemporary Language, Eugene H. Peterson, 2003
Pastoral Perspective, Charles James Cook, Feasting on the Word, Feb. 9, 2014
Presbyterians Today, Jan./Feb.2014 issue, *Sisters Stand and Walk Together*, p. 26