

“Anybody Got a Light?”

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Matthew 5: 13-20

I was a pretty good student when I was a kid—I thrived on good grades and quickly came to expect that I would have the right answers or be able to find them without too much effort. However, there was one test when I was in 5th grade that I failed so bad, I've never forgotten it. Before we took it, my teacher, Mrs. Garth passed out this test facedown and told us not to turn over the paper until she gave a signal. She said this would be different from most tests we took, and that it was going to be a timed test where we were to read the instructions very carefully. The goal was to be the first student to complete it and return it to her desk. At 10 years old I was already very competitive, so I stopped listening after she said “timed test.” I was just dying to jump up and be the first to finish. At her signal, I flipped over the piece of paper and began answering the first of twenty questions. The first question told me to write the date, so I did. The second one asked me what state I was born in...California. The third question asked me a simple math question, no problem there. When I was writing the answer, out of the corner of my eye, I saw another student jump up and hand in their completed test. I was crushed! I still had 17 more questions!

My pace became more frantic as the questions got weirder. The next one asked me to draw a circle around the fourth word on the page. I was doing that just as another classmate stood up and turned in their finished test, and then another. And another. Within a matter of seconds my cheeks were burning red and I was blind with shame that I still had so far to go, while so many others were finishing. I wondered what I was doing wrong and started to suspect that something wasn't right because after all, I was used to being one of the best. I expected it!

After another minute or so, Mrs. Garth said, “If you are still working on your test, please reread

the instructions at the top of the page in order to finish.” Ah ha! In my haste, I had skipped over these, assuming there were as useless as every other set of test instructions I had ever read. When I went back to read them, they said, “In order to complete this test, all you need to do is write your name at the top of the page, and turn it in. You do not need to answer any of the questions below.” Well. I experienced a quick range of emotions that began with feeling deceived and ended with feeling completely foolish. I had failed to take note of the very point of the lesson. That memory has stuck with me for twenty years—it was an incredibly powerful learning moment for me about assumptions, about thinking I have the right answers, about patience, and about doing things the way I always do instead of listening. It was a lesson well learned for me and is one I keep going back to in life, and keep relearning.

I was reminded of that lesson when I read our Gospel lesson for today. The passage from Matthew about being a light in the world and the salt of the earth is probably one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, and one of the most popular sayings of Jesus. It has been immortalized into poetry and slogans and songs, notably *This Little Light of Mine*, and is commonly used as a call to discipleship. It is so familiar, that I wonder if we sometimes go on autopilot when we hear it, if we have stopped really reading what it says because we assume we already know it. We assume we have it figured out and its meaning memorized, its application in our life well configured. This is a passage that is referred to and lifted up so often that we are in danger of not hearing it anymore, of relying on the same interpretation time and time again. That would be a mistake. When we read the Bible, even when we go back to familiar verses, we have the ability to read and listen as if each time is the first time—if we have the patience and the time to do it. One of the things we believe is that the Bible is not a static text—our views of it change and that depending on where we are or what we are going through, the text might speak to us in new and different ways. It would be a mistake to hear this passage and assume that we have it figured out, and that we already know what it is saying to us.

That memory of when I was ten years old kept coming into my head this week as I was thinking about this age-old passage. And I'm glad it did, because it reminded me to really look at the text, not to

assume I knew what it would say. When I finally did that, I was surprised. I usually think of this text as a call to action. I think of Jesus calling us to be light—to shine brighter and to go into the world and be bearers of God's love. I think of the salt as a reminder that we need to stay strong and persistent in the world—persisting in our mission, in our outreach, and in our good works. I usually hear this text and feel a call to mission and movement—a call to be more than I currently am, to show the best version of myself so that I can live up to Jesus' hopes for my life. There are a lot of times when that interpretation really works—it's perfect when we send out groups for a week of mission and hard work. It is perfect when we think of the way our gifts have the power to transform communities and bring hope and love into the world.

But that call to action is not the only interpretation. In fact, I was surprised when I went back and read it closely, that there weren't any explicit challenges or calls to action or mission in the text. When I tried to listen to the words as if I had never heard them before, *for the first time I heard these words as a blessing*. I heard in Jesus' words an affirmation of who we already are and how we were created by God. I heard not a call to be something new or something greater, but a call to keeping being who you are, whoever that is. The blessing is that you are enough—however you were made, whatever your gifts are, whatever is happening in your life today or this week or this year—you **are** light. You **are** salt: exactly as you were made. Maybe the call isn't to be something more or something different, but it is to keep being you. Let's listen to these words again, listening for the blessing from Jesus. Listen to how he describes who is a light and who is salt and what is required to be those bearers of light and love in the world.

“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.”

It is a blessing to hear and know that whoever we are, that is good enough. Jesus is offering a blessing to his disciples by reminding them who they already are: they are light. They are embodi-ers of hope. They are peacemakers. They are made this way and it isn't a call to become more than they already are—it is a call to keep being. If they keep on being the lights they were created as, that will be enough for others to see the light inside of them. No extra work or requirements necessary.

Sometimes, that message is a gift in itself. There are so many ways we are told to be more: be stronger, be louder, be the best we can be. Work harder and longer, be more generous and be kinder and more compassionate and more loving and gentler. Be more. But in this moment, Jesus is reminding his disciples that they are *already* lights in the world and they are *already* salt of the earth. We are already lights and grains of salt—our only call is to keep being such. Soul singer Curtis Mayfield would have heard this passage and said Jesus was telling us to keep on keepin' on.

Jesus warns of salt losing its taste, but when you really think about it, can salt lose its taste? It can dissolve in water, but as long as it is salt, it has flavor. You can't take that away. Similarly, Jesus says that no one puts a lit lamp under a bushel basket. And he is correct—that would snuff out the light or worse start a fire—so of course you wouldn't do that. Instead of being a reminder to us to shine brightly, I wonder if Jesus is pointing out that those things aren't possible or probably. I wonder, if instead of an admonition, they are a continuation of the blessing of this message—he is reminding the disciples, and us, that because God has named them as salt and light, that cannot be undone. Once salt is salt, it remains that, and there is nothing you can do to take the essence of that salt away. Once God pronounces you as a light in the world, God will not hide that light or put it out—God will help it to shine in the world, exactly as it was made.

In this way, the idea that we need to work or worry about maintaining our light or retaining our saltiness disappears. God has pronounced us good. God has named us beloved children, and that is enough. That can't be undone or taken away. When I think about the people in my life that I would consider to be a light in the world, they did not become that way because of some miraculous feat or

superhuman quality. They are light because they live with authenticity, because they are not afraid to be themselves. When we claim our identities and embrace the idea that who we are is good enough—our quirks, our curiosities, our mundane parts and the pieces that make us unique—that is what God made and claimed as a light in the world, that is what gives us our saltiness, that is all it takes to shine. Claim and accept your identity.

As adults, we have had a lifetime of hearing that we need to be more than we currently are and we need to work harder to make a difference and that if we relax, we might diminish. So, I can see you, some of you nodding along—I can see the looks that say, “Yes, of course God loves us exactly the way we are and we know we are salt and light and we shine.” But I think it takes a lot more to really believe that in your gut—to know that you are loved and that you are not only good enough for God, but by being yourself, you are shining brightly in the world, and nothing can take that away. It takes more than one person telling you before you really start to believe it. It takes time to shake off old assumptions. It takes going back to the text and rereading it carefully, looking for those words and messages that affirm that we are truly loved, exactly as we are. I love the song This Little Light of Mine. Often when we sing it we lift up a finger, indicating that we are working harder to let our light shine, that we are consciously lifting it up for the world to see. I wonder what it would feel like if we raised our finger and our hand as a way of saying, “Here I am God. You made me and I’m already shining. Thank you, for making me your light. Thank you, for making me shine.”