

The 21st Century Church

February 9, 2014

Matthew 5:13-20

Brooks Atkinson, a former writer for the New York Times, once said, “I have no objection to churches, so long as they don’t interfere with God’s work”.

An interesting comment, one that might raise some eyebrows and maybe even some hackles on first hearing. But I think it raises a relevant question that we as a church ought to consider.

Why are we here? What does it mean to be the church in Greensboro in 2014? Our gospel reading for today has some ideas for us on what it might be all about

Salt for the earth and light for the world, according to Matthew, seems to be how Jesus thought of his followers.

If we are to appreciate what Jesus was saying, we need to take a leap of imagination out of a world where salt is what you buy from Harris Teeter in packets or boxes and light is available at the flick of a switch. It wasn’t like that in Jesus’ day.

You are salt for the earth, Jesus said. What would the disciples have thought of that? Salt purified, preserved, and gave taste to food, of course, but there is more. Salt was a rare and precious commodity in the ancient world, so valuable that it was sometimes used as currency.

Throughout the Bible there are references to salt, and it suggests that the disciples were to purify, preserve and sanctify the earth and make it acceptable to God.

That’s quite a tall order, for ordinary people to make the earth acceptable to God. We need to be careful to understand the subtlety, and not to misunderstand our metaphors. Jesus obviously isn’t talking about flinging a handful of salt into a beef stew Justin Wilson style. Saltiness is something to be preserved and cherished, not something to be dissolved.

The message here is not ‘dissolve yourselves into society to give it taste and flavor’, but ‘retain your saltiness’. Because as Jesus says, ‘...if salt loses its taste, what can make it salty again?

It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled under people’s feet’. We aren’t the meat and vegetables, we are salt.

This Christian community needs to remain recognizable and visible. Salt which can’t be recognized for what it is might just as easily be sugar or monosodium glutamate.

This Christian community doesn’t have to be huge – a little salt goes a long way. Our work is twofold. First, we make the world acceptable to God and we do that first by offering the world to God – that is, by being God’s representatives within our sphere of influence.

And second, we do all that we can to preserve and purify the earth by allowing it to be what God created it to be. We are light for the world, Jesus said. Being light for the world is no easy option because on the whole the world prefers darkness to light.

Yet despite that, we are called to be the light of Christ, shining in people's sight.

So, salt and light – that's what the Christian community is called to be, distinctive, visible, sharing the world's predicament, yet pointing beyond it to the God from whom all things come, and to whom all things shall return.

As such we literally become a threat to the forces of destruction, death and darkness, the same forces that tried once to extinguish the Light of the World. That is the vocation of the church – salt for the world, light for the world. It is just as true now as it ever was.

So, as we think about what it means to be the church at this time and place, we need to be a community that is both salt and light.

Whatever resources we have, and I submit that we do have them in this Church, God has given to us to fulfill our calling, I would even say mandate, of being salt and light in the world.

What if we think we've already done that, or if we think we can't even begin to do that? In the third chapter of Philippians Paul talked about his journey following Christ.

I won't read all of that, but to summarize, Paul began by explaining how Jewish he was. In every category, against every criterion to measure Jewish-ness, he was the most Jewish. He wants us to believe that it was not possible to be more Jewish than he was.

And then he says that that was all rubbish. Actually the English translation softens that somewhat. The Greek word is a good bit less polite than I'll use here.

All this was rubbish, Paul says, because he has chosen to follow Christ, and all who follow Christ stand equal at the foot of the cross, regardless of qualifications and human status.

Paul then says that since he has turned to follow Christ, the original U-turn was not the end of the journey, it was the beginning. Paul suggests it's like running a race, and we only get to the end of race when we meet Christ again, however and whenever that is to take place.

Paul reminds us that living the Christian life is not easy, nor is it the end result. It's a journey, a process, a way. God has called his Church to be salt and light, distinctive, visible, sharing the world's predicament, yet also pointing beyond it to God.

It's an on-going process, it's not something we'll ever finish, but something that we have to keep going with.

But we also have to make a start. We can't wait forever to start, either. Now is the time to carry on the journey, with renewed vigor, of making the church ever more salt and light to the world. This is God's work in this time and this place.

Do you remember back when General Motors tried to sell us on the idea that "It's not your father's Oldsmobile." Most people didn't buy it, and we know what happened to the Oldsmobile. And we could add Pontiac, Mercury, Saturn, Plymouth, the list goes on.

What accounts for such radical changes in our economic world? Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Russian premier, commented, "History punishes those who come late." And he was right.

Someone recently told me about a video showing how some youth tried to define words that people who were raised in the church should have no problem defining. They couldn't do it.

Yet if you think this is only true of young people, think again. Christian author George Hunter III describes people today as "ignostic." To quote him: "they simply don't know what the church is talking about with its insider language."

The dilemma of the church is that those who know its words think they know what sin and salvation mean, and they are not interested. Those who don't know the words aren't interested in something they don't understand.

Here's the point...we, St. Paul Presbyterian Church along with the other churches in Guilford County and most of North Carolina need to learn how to be "salt" and "light" in the 21st Century world.

This isn't going to be easy because for the church to be "salt," that is the preservative and season for a world that is tasteless and bland, we have to realize that the world's taste in seasoning has changed.

Now, so you'll stay with me, let me say that this morning I'm not talking about or implying "whoop-de-doo" worship styles or things that a number of churches are trying in the face of declining memberships.

But if the church is to be "light", a city set on the hill, which offers hope, hearth and home to a world full of darkness and danger, we have to realize that the light sources in our world today are varied.

So how do we begin this task? First we realize that no matter what changes have happened in our world, in our lives, in our community that God is constant.

It doesn't matter what else happens God's love for the world is the same. He loves us with the same love shown by Jesus and he'll love our great-great-great grandchildren. He loves us with the same love he loves those in Haiti, and yes, Afghanistan, Iraq and Egypt.

There is no question that there have been enormous changes in the world. Just think about what we've seen in our own lifetimes. TVs, computers, smartphones – we could make a huge list.

And the hugeness of all this isn't meant to discourage us. It's an opportunity for God's grace to shine brighter. It's a matter of hope and promise all based on Christ's words.

Do you think the change seemed any less huge in 1544 when Gutenberg first produced the Bible in print for the masses? Do you realize that our Bibles have only been with us less than 500 years? And even then only a few could actually read them.

What changes do you think it meant for the church when the Presbyterians started educating everyone so that they could read the Bible?

Do you think the change seemed any less huge when only a few years into this new Christian movement, the Gentiles, those who didn't know the history of God's work with humanity through Israel, were suddenly becoming part of the Body of Christ?

No. Change has always been disconcerting, and what usually has happened when it comes about is that some of God's people see God at work and join him in it. Others don't and miss out on the wonderful changes that the Gospel brings to those in need.

We also need to seek to be the preservatives and source of comfort to all people and if that means changing our outreach so be it.

Did you realize that during the later years of his ministry Billy Graham stopped using the word "crusade" for his services? Why? Because he felt it had a negative connotation for some people whom he wants to reach with the love of Christ.

That's the reason for the rise in gender-inclusive translations of the Bible. And also gender-inclusive hymns and hymnals, some of which, by the way, I think go overboard and are silly.

But the gender inclusive scripture renderings are not so we can pray, "Our Mother" or "Our Parent" as some try to do today, but so we can clearly understand that when Paul writes, "brethren" he means "brothers and sisters".

Word usage does change over time. That's why I love some of the newer translations of the Bible. They give a much clearer understanding of what the writers originally meant.

We need to realize that the world that we want to reach with the great, unchanging news of God's love has changed.

I recall some statistics we looked at back when we were thinking about re-locating or re-building after the fire. That was several years ago now, and no doubt they have even changed some more.

But at that time, just in our area around here, 40% of the households have no faith involvement. 42% of the households are not WASPS. They aren't white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

The average age of the people was under 40 years old. How many of us in this room are at or below the average? About 45 % of them are single parent households.

And that is just locally. Study after study today shows that location, that is the geographical location of a church, is far down the list of reasons for joining. There are multitudes of people out there who are hungry for what we can offer.

And what is that? Your session has been wrestling with what we are and how we can be most effective in fulfilling our mission, which is reaching people for Christ.

We agree that we need to be what we are, a traditional church with an eye on the future, and not try to be something we aren't. I'm convinced, and I hope our people are, that there are many, many people today who are looking for that.

We need to market our church to the community. We need to sell it to a community that doesn't realize it has a need that only Christ can fill.

We might do that by billboards, by direct mailings, by ads – we're still working on the "how."

Now if that sounds crass let me explain that we're only doing what Paul did which is making Christ known. We're not going to dumb down the gospel so that people will be sold a bill of goods.

We want to let them know we are here and that we want them to come and investigate this Jesus who we call Lord and Savior.

Here's what it's going to take. Faithfulness on the part of all the members. Now, no one is going to be asked to do anything beyond your ability. But all of us can learn – learn how to talk about our church to others that we come in contact with.

I don't have statistics, but I'm willing to bet that all of us come in contact frequently with people who are unchurched or who may be seeking a new church home.

Hey – we talk about the weather, the game, the TV show, dozens of things. Why not talk about our church. Invite.

And then, we can learn how to be even more friendly, accommodating, hospitable and welcoming to those who come.

We will learn how to distinguish between the container and the content.- between “who we are” and “how we function”.

At the time that Paul and the Gospel writers wrote, the single biggest event ever was suddenly in the grasp of everyone. Its power could change empty lives into meaningful lives. It made work, love, and play worthwhile. It gave a deep sense of hope, purpose and joy to anyone from the poorest to the richest.

People could have their very nature transformed, even those things they thought they could never change. And they could become something they never dreamed possible.

This is the message that Paul took to his world and the message that we still take to our world today. Paul spoke Hebrew and Greek to get his message across. He preached in synagogues and streets, in homes and beside rivers.

We speak with music, words and loving actions, all to the same end: that the salt and light of Christ’s people—the preserving and welcoming power of the CHURCH might break into the bland dark lives of the world around us.

The future with Christ is great. All we have to do is join Him in it.