

## “Got Salt To Spread Around?”

Date: Feb. 4, 2007

Text: Matthew 5: 13-16

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” What does that mean in practical terms for everyday living? I suspect your immediate response would be that we are to live out our faith each day, right? But does Jesus’ statement also imply sharing our faith verbally as well as doing good deeds? Whenever I raise the matter of talking about our faith when appropriate I am reminded of what used to happen when I had so-call “chats” with our teenagers. No big issues but when I tried to discuss grades, staying out, cleaning their room or some other typical parental concern I always got the feeling they were thinking “Get it over with dad so I can get on with my life.”

Am I wrong or is that teenager attitude what I sense among Presbyterians every time I try to connect Jesus’ words “You are the salt of the earth” with the idea of sharing your faith not only in deed but also verbally. Salt in the ancient world literally made the difference between food spoiling or not or its being tasty or tasteless. Our word “salary” actually derives from “salarium” the Latin word referring to money given to Roman soldiers to purchase salt. That’s how precious salt was. Jesus said that his followers were to flavor the earth with God’s saltiness.

The New Testament is filled with stories of people who shared their faith with those around them. Why is it then that whenever I speak about Christians “being the salt of the earth”, the resistance starts to grow and I feel just like I did in those teenage conversations? “Is he going to ask me to go door-to-door?” “I certainly don’t want to pass out pamphlets.” “Why did I come this Sunday?” Why this great reluctance among Mainline Christians to share their faith in everyday conversation?

Part of the problem is that the visual image of sharing our faith conjures people with Bibles pushing a hard sell Christianity and threatening judgment if one doesn’t respond. Thus, we are very uncomfortable with the thought of discussing our faith at the golf course, supermarket or school cafeteria. Mainline Christians need to be educated in a different brand of sharing. The Asian Christian D.T. Niles presented the classic definition: “evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.” It simply is a matter of sharing what has worked in your life without judging anyone else’s approach.

Another part of the reluctance comes from our own faith uncertainties. Our convictions may not seem as strong as others or we have some doubts. We lack self-confidence and worry about what people will say. Whatever the reason it’s obvious that by not sharing our particular brand of faith the stage has been turned over to others who have no reluctance at all. That is a tragedy. I am, as I think you can tell from our time together, deeply committed to social issues but that doesn’t mean that I want to turn all spiritual conversation over to Christians who are so judgmental.

How can a connection be made between Jesus’ exhortation to be “the salt of the earth” and our own daily practices that will work for us Presbyterians? Let me try a different approach so it doesn’t end up like those conversations with our teenagers. Later today we will be besieged by Super Bowl ads. Two and a half million dollars for 30 seconds! Obviously companies think that marketing pays off. Let’s think of being “the salt of the earth” in marketing terms. One of the first questions in any business venture is: “does the product work?” A camera or car or tool is tested. Many of us have tried the product offered by Jesus in our own lives. Has it been effective? Has Jesus brought comfort and strength, has he helped you become more loving, has your vision broadened so that you now are a bigger person? I think that many of us could speak to the effectiveness of this product. It works. God’s love given in Christ can make a difference.

Another marketing question - How many out there need this product? How many people need to know there is life after death, need to find forgiveness, need to feel there is hope for a better world? My answer - A WHOLE BUNCH! Jesus said the “harvest is plentiful but the workers few” and he continues to be so right. People have a great need for exactly what the New Testament promises. I believe a growing number, larger

than you might realize, are looking for a more balanced faith than often presented in the media, for a faith that combines heart and mind, inward and outward, personal growth and social justice which is exactly what Mainline Christianity is trying to offer

The product is effective; the market certainly is out there. So what comes next? The product has to be introduced and primarily that happens by getting the word out. . The sponsors of the Super Bowl ads obviously think advertising works. We share our interest in sports, what car we prefer, our favorite songs and on and on. Can we not share our faith both in word and deed? Did you know that 80% of the people who join a church do so because someone first invited them? Caring about others, transporting someone to chemo treatments, such deeds definitely are important but so is mentioning how faith helped you get through cancer or live with the loss of a loved one or find direction in life. That's the challenge of the Christian faith.

Consider this true story. An employer in a small business received this letter during WW II.

Dear Sir,

I'm a sailor and I'll be pulling out in a few hours but first I've got something I want to say. I came into your office this morning lonely and scared to death about sailing back into combat.

I wanted to talk to somebody pretty bad. So when the girl at the desk said hello I went and asked her if she had a job for me just to start a conversation. She said for me to sit down for a few minutes. I told her maybe there wouldn't be any jobs or anything after the war. and that if a fellow could only be sure there would be something worth dying for, it wouldn't be so bad.

She smiled (she's got a friendly kind of smile) and said that's easy. Christ stands by each of us and he makes life worth living. I just looked at her and she talked as if he were alive and a good pal of hers. I sort of expected to see him walk in the door it was so real.

I was only there about 10 minutes and I don't know why but her talking like that sort of did something for me and I'm not scared any more. It was like she said, "I want to make you acquainted with my friend Jesus. You ought to know each other since he'll be going your way." I'm 19 and I never knew before that there was a God like that who would go along with a guy. It doesn't matter as much now if my ship goes down as long as there is a God no sub can sink.

I wanted to tell that woman thank you but I didn't want to seem fresh. Maybe you can tell her for me and thank you.

Respectfully and gratefully yours,

This story says that we never can be sure exactly what will happen when we try to share our faith. It's important for us to remember that in Jesus' teaching he doesn't say that we "are to become salt." Rather the implication is that we already are "the salt of the earth" and need to use what is within us. We simply share what Christ has given to us and the Holy Spirit does the rest. That's a crucial point to remember. All that we need to do is live out our faith and God will do the rest.

So I ask that fateful question: Got salt to spread around? It's probably the wrong question to ask in the middle of winter in an area hit with lake effect storms. But still, are you going to treat Jesus' challenge like conversations with my teenagers or are you going to spread some God's salt around this week? Have I convinced any Presbyterians to give it a try?