February 9, 2014
Matthew 5:13-20
*What is the Point?*

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 5:13-20 (Message)

 “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

“Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God’s Law or the Prophets. I’m not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God’s Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God’s Law will be alive and working.

“Trivialize even the smallest item in God’s Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won’t know the first thing about entering the kingdom.”

 At a church one Sunday the children’s Sunday School did a play to show what they had been learning in Sunday School.  A little girl was assigned the part of saying, "I am the light of the world." When the curtains parted and she looked out upon a sea of faces, she went blank. Her mother was sitting close to the front. She whispered to her daughter, "I am the light of the world." But the little girl did not hear it. The mother repeated the words a little louder but still there was no response. Then in a very loud whisper, which could be heard for several rows, her mother said again, "I am the light of the world." Then the little girl blurted out, "Oh yes, my mother is the light of the world!"

 Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.”  “You are the light of the world.”  “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”  It is hard for me not to break out in song when I hear those verses, “Let my light shine bright through the night through the day, all the way for you, yee haw!”  Or “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.  This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.”

Jesus doesn’t say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this...." Or, "before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you...." Rather, he says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." It is, as with last week's Beatitudes, sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning.

In the time of Jesus and long before that and ever since, salt was necessary for the preservation of food. Having it or not having it was the difference between life and death.  Jesus’ first listeners knew that salt was necessary for life.  There are many references in the Hebrew Scriptures to salt’s essential nature.  The prophet Elisha sprinkled salt into the spring at Jericho to purify the water in 2 Kings 2:21.  In Numbers 18:19 it talks about a covenant of salt as the Israelites present their offerings to the Lord.  Priests put salt on sacrifices, and seasoned incense with salt.  Parents rubbed salt all over their newborn baby’s body as protection against all kinds of ills (Ezekiel 16:4).

Our bodies contain salt and without salt our hearts would not beat, blood would not flow, and our muscles would not work properly.  Before birth a baby grows in a saline solution. Accident victims may receive a salt solution intravenously. In Roman times salt was so precious that it was used to pay workers. The word "salary" comes from the Latin salarium, a word for salt. A person not worth his or her salt is one not worthy of wages.  Consider, too, the importance of light.  Without the light of the sun, we would not exist.  Ernie Pyle, a famous World War II correspondent, wrote to a friend, "If you have any light, shine it in my direction. God knows that I have run out of light."  Light symbolizes a life of quality and service. When Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, he watched an old lamp lighter igniting lamps as he went down the street. Stevenson said to his nurse, "I am watching a man put holes in the darkness."  John Ruskin watched a lamplighter light his lamps and said, "Now that is what I mean by being a Christian. You ought to be able to see where he has been by the lights that he leaves burning behind him."

As salt we preserve, purify and give seasoning to the world.  As light we give light to scatter darkness.  In those church growth seminars they often ask, “If your church did not exist would anyone notice?  At Greenland Hills that is an interesting question because it is hard to find us now!  The preschool committee interviewed a preschool teacher who had grown up on Matilda and had no idea that Greenland Hills was here!  We may be tucked away and hidden but we do make a tremendous difference in our community.  Those who volunteer on Tuesdays at the food pantry with the Emanuel Community Center, those who teach our children Sunday School and work with our youth group and confirmation kids.  Those who make sure that our church is clean and that the lights are working so that Boy Scout Troop 325 can meet here and the kindermusik families and Narcotics Anonymous.  We are salt and light around the world with our mission trips to Juarez to build homes and to El Salvador to build homes.  We are good at building homes for people!  If you want to come with us to build homes in El Salvador with Habitat please come to the information session next Sunday at 10 am in Glory Be Hall.  We are salt and light to our community.

With all of the horrible things that I read in the paper about “Christians,” I wonder sometimes if the world needs us.  I have to admit to you that I do not have any fish or other markings on my car that indicate that I am a Christian.  I do this for the good of all Christians everywhere as I am a horrible driver.  I wonder if some of the Christians in our world today are too salty.  Too much salt in our food causes high blood pressure and food with too much salt is gross.  Can Christians be too salty?  Can we get or give too much religion?  Can we be too spiritual or pious?

A man took his car to a garage and told the mechanic, "Something is wrong. I don't have any lights." The mechanic suggested, "Probably your battery is dead." "No," the owner explained, "My horn still blows. It couldn't be the battery." The mechanic explained, "It still might be the battery, because it takes more power to give light than to blow a horn." It is easier to shout than to show. It is easier to say than to do.  There are many Christians in our world today who shout rather than show, who say rather than do.  If we focus on Jesus, we will be okay.  If we eat with sinners, house the homeless, feed the hungry, and visit those who are imprisoned we are doing the right things.

Salt does not exist for its own sake.  No one sits down to eat a plate of salt.  Salt is meant to penetrate and preserve and flavor the food that people eat.  And in the same way light is not meant to be looked at, it is not meant to be covered, it is given so that people might see what is around them and walk in safety, it is meant to penetrate and overcome darkness.  Jesus is telling us that we change our surroundings, we just do.

"You are the salt of the earth.  You are the light of the world.”  You are of great value.  You are a person of principle and integrity.  You are courageous.  You are strong.  All you have to do is be and do what you were made to be and do.  You are salt.  You are light.  Jesus tells us to shine and shine brightly.

Is it enough to just sit back and shine or even bask in others light? Let's think about a thermometer and a thermostat and see if that tells us anything.  A thermometer reflects its environment, it shows what the temperature is, if it’s hot outside - it says it’s hot; if it’s cold, it says it’s cold; it exerts no influence on what's around it - rather it is influenced by it; but not so a thermostat.  A thermostat has power, it sets the temperature, it changes things.  Are you a thermometer, or a thermostat?  It doesn't take much to be a thermometer, all you have to do is go along with what everyone else wants.  When others around you are teasing and or being racist or intolerant, all you have to do is be quiet, to not make waves - you may even perhaps join with them in their laughter.  When someone is hurt and alone, or feeling offended or betrayed, or simply depressed, all you have to do is walk on by.  All you have to do is go on doing what you were doing before, as if nothing was happening that needed your attention.  All you have to do to be a thermometer is go with the flow, to not speak about God's power and love, to not witness by your deeds to God's grace and mercy.

What is the point of life?  We are the salt of the earth.  We are the light of the world.  We are the thermostats in a world of varying temperatures.  We are the infectious disease that God wants all people to catch.  We are the transformers that God has chosen.  It is God who puts God’s light into us; it is God who seasons us with God’s presence.  God only asks that we be what God has made us to be.