

Betsey Moe  
Sermon 4.18.10  
“Being Salt”

Exodus 19:1-8

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. 3Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” 7So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8The people all answered as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

Matthew 5:13-16

13“*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 underfoot.* 14“*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.* 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In 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.

When I was a child, my family was not much into collecting things. We had no curio cabinet, no knick-knack shelves. But sometime when I was in high school, my mother inherited her Aunt Naomi’s vast salt and pepper shaker collection. Together, my sisters, my mom, and I unpacked box after box, carefully unrolling yellowed newspaper from the 1960’s to find the treasures within. I brought a few of the best sets with me today: an early plastic mixer – the little beaters are the salt and pepper; here’s a lunch pail and thermos; here’s a favorite: JFK is the salt, and his rocking chair is the pepper. This is one I don’t fully understand – a wooden set of outhouses. Whose idea was this? Isn’t it a bit unappetizing to shake an outhouse over your mashed potatoes?

As we kids moved out of the house, my mom began to display some of these sets – and now my own children enjoy looking at the tiny figures behind glass. They do think it is a bit odd that although there are sets and sets of fun little salt and pepper shakers all over grandma’s house, we never use any of them when it comes time to season our food, opting instead for the big, boring, utilitarian grinders from Costco. “These are antiques,” we tell them. “Even if there *were* salt in them, they are too precious to shake.”

I understand the irony. If something is made for a particular purpose, isn’t it strange when it is not *used* for that purpose? Salt stuck in a saltshaker, then placed behind glass doesn’t make too much sense – at least to someone who is not a collector.

And this is what Jesus was getting at here at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount when he told his disciples that they were the “salt of the earth.” Salt and light are two things that are senseless when they are separated from their purposes. Salt that loses its saltiness – its ability to season – might as well be thrown out as sand, Jesus said. A lit lamp hidden under a basket is equally ridiculous. The disciples were chosen by Jesus not just to be seen by others as special, like collectors’ items. Neither were they chosen by Jesus to enjoy the special protection of God, like delicate figures behind glass. The disciples were chosen by Jesus to move *out* of the saltshaker and live out the purpose of spreading the gospel message. They were blessed to bring blessing to the whole earth. When the disciples moved out of the saltshaker and lived into their mission, everyone else would “see their good works and give glory to their Father in heaven.”

In many ways, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is supposed to remind us of another sermon on another mount, given a little over a thousand years before. Moses at Mount Sinai told the Israelites almost the same thing right before he gave them the Ten Commandments: “You are God’s treasured possession, a holy nation.” But Moses didn’t stop there. Israel’s “chosen” status would be intertwined with a mission, a purpose, a way of living in the world that would bring blessing to the earth. When Israel lived in obedience to God, following the law, the whole world would see their good works and know God’s power. Israel’s existence as God’s people could not be separated from their mission. They were both chosen *and* sent; in Genesis, the line is “blessed to *be a blessing*.”

But it is not easy to be dedicated to mission like this, to live in radical obedience to God, to always be “moving out of the saltshaker.” Just as Israel and the early church struggled to be a blessing to the nations around them, the contemporary church struggles as well. I wonder if one of the reasons we tend to stay in the saltshaker, confining our Christian identity within the comfortable walls of the church, is that we get overwhelmed by the idea of mission. The world has so many needs; the number of people who haven’t heard about Christ seems to be growing, and let’s face it, to leave your life as you know it to go to Haiti or Zimbabwe or Indonesia is just not feasible. Mission is something we are all supposed to support – not something we are all supposed to do. We think, “God, thanks for making me salt, but when you shake your grand saltshaker, can you just shake me out somewhere close to home?”

Which brings us to the great surprise that Jesus pulled out next. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount, which spells out our mission – what it means to *be salt* – doesn’t say anything about foreign mission. It doesn’t say anything about door-to-door evangelism, and it doesn’t say anything about going to seminary or becoming a professional missionary. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount lifts up the fact that mission is lived out in the ordinary – in the way we speak to our neighbors and colleagues and family members, in the way we spend our money, in the way we treat the people who mistreat or take advantage of us. You can see for yourselves as you flip through Matthew chapters 5-7 that Jesus’ idea of moving out of the saltshaker is very much in the realm of the ordinary and can be done wherever you are. I recently heard something that Mother Teresa said that captures this idea: “Help one person at a time, and always start with the person closest to you.” Mission is all around us.

Pastor Ken and I will be preaching on the specifics of the Sermon on the Mount over the next eight weeks, but let me give you a preview:

Jesus says that insulting someone, calling them a fool, is not behavior fit for disciples. Instead, we are always to work with reconciliation in mind. So staying out of gossip circles and speaking encouraging words about others *is* mission.

In two weeks, I'll be preaching on what Jesus says about oaths and divorce. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says essentially that making commitments and intentionally working at staying true to those commitments *is mission*. This means that the twenty-two couples who come here once a month to the "Five Great Dates" series to work on their marriages are moving out of the saltshaker. They probably didn't know that going on dates is mission work!

Today we heard in our Minute for Mission about the work of the Latah Valley Church – and some of you may consider giving to this ministry. Well, later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about our hearts being where we place our treasure. And I can't help but think that those who make a financial sacrifice not just for their own home church but for a church they don't even attend so that more people in Spokane might hear the gospel message are moving out of the saltshaker; they are being missionaries.

Mission is not something we do or don't *support*; it is an essential part of our lives as Christians. We cannot exist as Christians apart from being engaged in God's mission any more than Jesus could have existed as God's Son apart from his mission of living and dying for humanity. In the Sermon on the Mount, indeed, through entering full-on into the human experience, Jesus declared our workplaces, our schools, our dinner tables to be the mission field. Mission happens in our marriages, our personal budgets, our relationships with our next-door neighbors. Jesus wants every one of us to be a missionary – and always to start with the person closest to us.

I remember one summer a while back when I led a group of teenagers to build houses in Mexico. We raised funds for the trip over a good part of the year, and these kids were pumped up about the mission work they were about to do – they were convinced that they were going to make a real difference in the lives of four families in Juarez. Of course, at youth group, they were their normal selves – stuck in their cliques, caught up in petty arguments, trying to come up with the wittiest insults that would impress the opposite sex. For a week in June, when they arrived in Mexico, they would be missionaries; until then, they would be, well, teenagers.

The Sunday before we left, I remember preaching a sermon from the Sermon on the Mount about this radical behavior that Jesus called for – about seeing mission in the ordinary. And one kid took it to heart in a way I didn't expect. I'll call him Luke; Luke had lots of friends in the youth group – both girls and guys. The morning the bus left for Mexico, all the kids arrived in the church parking lot at about the same time, and I could see that the scramble was on to pair up with a good seat partner; the kids congregated in one big mob in the middle of the parking lot, away from their parents, and two by two, pairs would emerge from the mob and board one of the buses. Luke arrived with his pillow and sleeping bag and duffel bag, and instead of getting into the middle of the mob of kids, he walked over underneath a tree where a kid named TJ was standing. I had been surprised that TJ had even signed up for the trip – a kid who preferred army fatigues over jeans and t-shirts and whose face had more than his fair share of acne on it, TJ didn't fit the mold of the average youth group kid. He was already in his own world under that

tree, listening on headphones to, undoubtedly, a heavy-metal band. I worried that his parents had forced him to go on this trip.

Luke walked up to TJ and said, “What are you listening to?” I watched TJ hand Luke one of his headphones. Then Luke said, “Do you have a seat partner yet?” and a little later I watched in awe as they walked to the bus together.

Luke – a 15-year-old kid – got it. Before the bus even left the parking lot, Luke had left the saltshaker. Before the mission trip had begun, Luke was being a missionary. And it can be the same for each of us. Why not? Mission is close to us, mission is who we are.