



Rev. Dr. Craig Lindsey

A Grain of Salt and a Spark of Light

Sunday, February 9, 2020

When I sent my Sermon themes for the Newsletter, I did not yet have an exact title for this morning, so referred to this as "Sermon On the Mount Part 2". Which I suppose means that if you hated last week, this is more of the same. However, where in 1-12, the Preacher identified and empathized with those in the crowd who had lost HOPE and those who LOST JOY, as well as those who were HUMILIATED by LIFE, calling each BLESSED, verses 13 and 14 jump to another gear. The fundamental questions of this part of Jesus' Sermon are two questions for us as Christians: WHO ARE WE? And, WHAT ARE WE TO DO? Was Jesus bringing a new teaching or re-enforcement and clarification of the Law of Moses? Is America a Judeo-Christian Country? What does it mean for us today to say "In God We Trust"? What does it mean for our Leadership and Jurors to swear to God to be impartial, if God is not their highest authority?

As Christians we live between the Baptism and Resurrection. We have declared and affirmed what we want to be, and yet we need to live into that before this becomes our identity. Theologian Karl Barth identified that if we were Prisoners, who were set Free, but had not yet found our place in the world anew, we still were Prisoners. Barbara Brown Taylor tried to explain, "As you leave the Church to go out into the world you will each be given a check for a Million dollars... but until the banks open tomorrow, until the checks clear, you cannot spend it, you are not yet a millionaire." In this transition, who are you?

These few verses were the theological foundation for my Doctoral Thesis. My conviction being that Resurrection is not only a once in history event of atonement in the life of Jesus, but Resurrection also happens in and through the Church when we forget What we believe and Why, and therefore who we are called to be.

Throughout human history, SALT has been essential. Harvard Medical School, in describing the importance of Salt, said "The History of the Americas, Europe and Asia have been constant warfare over Salt." To a chemist, Salt is what you get when positive and negative ions enter each other's orbit. To the rest of the world Salt is Sodium Chloride. Part of the fighting between Confederate and Union soldiers was over Salt, between Cape Cod Militiamen and The British Army was over salt. The human body cannot live without Salt. Before the use of refrigeration and freezing, salt was used as a preservative. Salt in limited quantities opens your tastebuds and gives food greater true flavor without adding any other spice. Farmers used salt in combination with manure for fertilization. Yet in the Peloponnesian Wars, the victors poisoned the soil by dumping excessive amounts of Salt onto the farmlands to poison the earth for generations. As clear and odorless, Salt impacts whatever it touches. Making homemade ice cream, we put salt on ice to lower the temperature of the cream. In the Northern climates they use salt to melt the ice on roadways and corrode our vehicles. At differing times in history, Salt was used as currency.

What Jesus was saying was "You are as Basic as the Elements of Creation itself. You are the Salt of the Earth." Unto itself, salt does nothing; but Salt reduces PH, salt balances, salt preserves, salt has essential value to life. Salt represents our Integrity. Salt represents our Righteousness, which is not moral purity or knowledge, Righteousness simply refers to Right Relationship being One with God.

In the same way, to provide light in the midst of light adds little, but in the darkness, light illuminates, giving shape and shadow and substance to what we could not discern. I love old movies. One of the things we have come to realize, no matter how big the screen, or how many pixels, Black and White had greater texture than once we introduced color film.

The difficulty with colorizing black and white, providing light in the darkness, salt in a puddle, there comes a point when Light is obscured by light, when salt has so taken on the flavor and odor and moisture of its surrounding that salt loses its salt-ness. In English, I came to recognize this verse even has a pun, because a synonym we use for salt-ness, is “Savor” which sounds a great deal like “Savior”; therefore what Jesus was saying was As Christians we are the Salt of the Earth, but when as Christians we have lost our Savior, what good are we? As the Church in the World today, we cannot allow ourselves to be a Club, a Nice Group of People, an Organization... We must be The Church.

Matthew lived in a time of theological and social tension. The Roman Empire not only Crucified Jesus, 40 years later the Roman Empire intentionally destroyed the Temple at Jerusalem. Culture had attacked and destroyed not only the precepts of faith in God, but the means of Sacrifice, Atonement and Reconciliation. For us today, these same tensions began in the 1960s, escalated as we approached the turn of the Century, and today ALL VALUES AND PRACTICES OF EARLIER GENERATIONS ARE A QUESTION.

In 2008, my friend Phyllis Tickle published a book titled The Great Emergence. Phyllis Tickle was not a Theologian or a Minister, she was a member of her Episcopal Church and she was the Editor of “Publishers Weekly”, meaning she was incredibly well read. Phyllis Tickle identified that every 500 years, cultures throughout history have re-examined their values and ideas and relationships, giving rise to revolution. Every 500 years circumstance have caused us to bring out all of our sacred issues, rituals, relics and forgotten ideas, like emptying the attic of all the old family heirlooms and junk, to determine which ideas in our culture still have relevance and application versus what are broken beyond any repair. Her claim was that the last time Church and Culture explored these ideas the Printing Press had been invented and used to mass produce the Bible, leading to Martin Luther’s Reformation. 500 years before that had been the Fall of the Holy Roman Empire at the turn of the first Millennia. She questioned whether today organized religion was dead, whether our salt had lost its saltiness?

Reading through the ideas of American religious heritage, Phyllis lifted out Fundamentalism, as identifying a clear basic articulation of what American Christianity had as core beliefs in the 20th Century. However, this is where my friend Phyllis and I locked horns, because what she had not known or understood was the origin of Fundamentalism and Progressivism within the Presbyterian Church. AND it is the juxtaposition of these two which gives the Church in the world today our identity. Too often, we have allowed each side to try to win, without recognizing we require both.

In the summer of 1920 at a Summer Bible Camp just outside Niagara Falls, NY called Niagara on the Lake, conservative members of the Presbyterian Church banded together around the topic “What are the Fundamentals of Christianity?” They arrived at Five Fundamentals that they agreed upon, believing all Christians and all Presbyterian Ministers, Elders and Deacons had to accept:

- 1) Every word and story of the Bible is Literally True
- 2) The Perpetual Virginity of Mary
- 3) The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus
- 4) The Blood Atonement of Jesus for our Sins

5) The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

You could believe other things as personal faith, but these Five represented the lowest Common Denominator of what Christian Fundamentalists believed. This was the origin of Fundamentalism in the 20th Century. The Fundamentalists came to the next meeting of the General Assembly insisting that every Minister and Elder, in order to keep their Ordination in the Presbyterian Church, had to sign their acceptance of these Fundamentals.

However, in 1923 there was a Baptist minister serving as the Associate Pastor at New York City's First Presbyterian Church named Harry Emerson Fosdick. And Fosdick refused to sign the Fundamentals because he did not believe in the Perpetual Virginity of Mary. Fosdick as a Baptist serving a Presbyterian Church was brought up on charges, that made their way through the appellate courts of the Church up to the General Assembly. Taking note of this controversy, the alumni of the Presbyterian Seminary at Auburn, New York wrote a petition to the General Assembly defending Pastor Fosdick. Their argument was that while we may agree to a greater or lesser degree on these five articles, what matters is not the lowest common denominator of our fundamentals, the basic minimums of what we can agree upon, but the highest aspirations of what God calls us to believe and do. These who espoused greater and greater alternatives being offered by God, titled themselves the Progressives. What transpired was that Fosdick was acquitted of all charges, Nelson Rockefeller offered the funds to build Riverside Church in New York City as a Baptist/Presbyterian/Congregationalist Church with Harry Emerson Fosdick as their first Pastor, and ever since there has been a tension between Fundamentalists and Progressives.

We stated at the outset that Chemists understand when Positive ions and Negative ions enter one another's orbit, the result is salt, when Fundamentalists and Progressives work together, when Conservative and Liberal ideas join forces we can be the salt of the earth.