

Prophetic Salt and Light

from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

by

Youth Sunday: Julia Getty, Lucas Burton, Davis Barton

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Matthew 5:13-20

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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

I had the amazing opportunity to go to the Costa Rica mission trip in 2012 within our BMPC youth program. We ran a bible camp at a local school and met children who didn't have much, yet they were the most uplifting, grateful people I have ever met. We played soccer together, sang songs, learned about the Bible and as I got to know them, I realized that they were truly God's children and "the salt of the earth." The text compares us to the salt of the earth, but also questions what happens when the salt loses its saltiness. Salt plays a critical function in all living creatures: it regulates the water content of the body and preserves food. In the ancient world, newborn babies were rubbed in salt to heal cuts and fight against infection. Salt was considered precious, valuable, and was prized for its distinct purposes. Through its many uses, it became a symbol for purity. The text reveals that the world is decayed and that we must represent salt and make the world pure again. We must act as the salt of the earth and take up the cross and follow Christ. But what happens if people profess to believe in Jesus, but do not advance in righteousness, holiness, humility, love, and service? We all must remain distinct in our faith to assure we don't lose our saltiness. When there is nothing distinctive about them, of what value do they serve for the Lord's purposes? For this reason, we can't just claim to be followers of Christ, but must follow through with his plans. Therefore, Jesus' words provide assurance and a warning. We cannot be distinctive in holiness by ourselves; we must humbly submit to Jesus' trusting faith. When we turn to God and begin serving The Lord Jesus we become the salt of the earth. But we can only remain beneficial if we remain distinctive, and we can only remain distinctiveness by maintaining purity. We must seek after pure Christianity through humble service to God, seeking to align our will to His in every way. If we do not maintain that purity, but turn and follow after the lusts of the world, then there remains nothing distinctive about us. If there is nothing distinctive about us, we will be impure and lost by being the salt with no saltiness.

Pursuing justice, righteousness, and holiness we allow us be distinctive in a world filled with impurity. Let us remain the salt of the earth, seeking purity, and praising the name of The Lord!

Julia Getty

Let's start with an anecdote. I'm sitting in my English class this year, and we're discussing a book with a plethora of Biblical allusions. The teacher is trying to get us to tease out the numerous connections therein. My peers are struggling, for many of them lack a background that would help them- that is to say, many of them had never looked at a Bible. So the duty fell to me to timidly raise my hand and start talking about it. My classmates had a vague look of surprise on their faces to see me talking about these things.

After class, a couple of them came up to me. "How did you know all of that?" they asked, still evidently confounded as to how I could possibly know the Bible. "I'm Christian- Presbyterian," I responded. They were shocked. They had had no idea.

Over the coming days I came to realize that this was the case even with many of my closer friends. They didn't know that I was religious at all. I had never talked about it. I then started thinking a bit more about this, and realized that most of my peers hadn't expressed anything about their religious beliefs either. So I started looking around, and my results surprised me. Many of my peers were religious- they just never talked about it.

Often times today it seems as though there is a taboo on the topic of religion. It's one of the items on a list of things that isn't talked about among many people, residing alongside the likes of things like politics. Whenever religion is brought up in conversation, many people just smile and nod, without acknowledging their own standing.

Often we choose to value our standing in society over our standing with God. We have been called upon to let our light shine before others, but instead we hide our faith.

But why is it taboo? There could be numerous causes. Even those not among the Presbyterian denomination can make us feel nervous about expressing our faith. Just look at the actions of groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, or even the Islamic extremists we see in the world. They do not number among those of our faith, or even among the majority of those in their own faiths, but they still make religion seem far more negative than we know it to be. Even though our faith is far different than theirs, we still choose to hide it, from fear, shame, or any number of reasons.

Expression of religion is a tricky field to navigate. History has many examples for us, both good and bad. We've seen such negative expressions as what the aforementioned groups have done, the Spanish Inquisition, and even the Crusades. We've seen the pain and chaos that these have caused, and it has frightened people. Yet we must also look at the great things in history. I doubt that I need to explain the positive impact Moses had on the Israelites he freed from the Egyptians. Speaking of freedom, religious groups were a major part of the founding of this country. They were also a major part of the abolishment of slavery. It is easy to look back and see the darkness, but religion has also brought so much light to the world.

So then, in our day, let us let our light shine in a positive way. Where some of these groups use their religion as an excuse, or a validation, we can use ours to create those good works that we have been called to do. We can show that religion is not something to be ashamed of, or something to conceal, but rather something to celebrate, a beacon of light in our era.

We can become our own beacons of light, as we have been called to do, so that we can recreate the public image of religion, by performing good works in the name of our own. Let us make it something of which everyone can be proud.

Let us cast away the bushel basket of the taboo on religion. Let us put the light that is our faith on the lamp stand so that all may see it and it may touch all. Let us show our good works, and make them known. And let us give glory to our Father in heaven by doing so.

Lucas Barton

If you don't already know; now is a pretty stressful time to be a senior in high school. Ask anybody who spoke today and they will tell you the same story: a tale of college applications, final grades, and the knowledge that within a year we will be on our own in the world, untethered for the first time. It is times like these that come to question our own identities, and what we stand for in the world. Independent of our friends and family we ask ourselves: Who are we? What do we believe in? And how *exactly* did we become who we are today?

The funny thing about identity is that depending on who you ask, you could get a thousand different answers to the question, "What makes you, you?" Racial identity, gender identity, nationality, sexual orientation, and more can all contribute to every individual's sense of self. But today, I would like to talk to you about a part of my own identity; that I have held dear to me for as long as I can remember.

While this may take many of you by surprise I am, believe it or not, a Christian. Not only a Christian, but a proud one. Before I could even remember this church has been a second home for me. Bryn Mawr Presbyterian has played an absolutely critical role in

instilling within me a sense of community, faith and belonging, unlike any other aspect of my life. Some of my earliest memories, and closest friends were made here, just a few doors down in the education building. It was here that I was first made aware of my religion, and where I came to understand the true meaning, and beauty of my faith. This church is something that I will be forever grateful for, and as I move on in life and away from home, I will keep it close to my heart.

But if you will allow me to speak frankly for a moment I will tell you this: in an increasingly secular world, I believe that it is now harder than ever for this upcoming generation to practice Christianity.

When those who supposedly share my faith are portrayed by the mainstream media as extremists, who disregard the central teachings of Christ and spread messages of hatred and divisiveness, it makes me question what others will think of me when I tell them that I too am a Christian. When certain sects of our religion emphasis promoting policies that ostracize, and discriminate against those who are different sexual orientations or nationalities, it makes me fear for the future of our religion. When individuals choose to follow their own skewed agenda rather than following the example of Christ, it makes me fear for the future of our religion. Jesus was a man who associated with the most marginalized groups of his time; lepers, adulterers, heathens the list goes on and on. I believe that regardless of our political, or social beliefs we are Christians first and that means showing compassion to everybody; bar none. Yet I fear that there is an increasing disconnect between my personal beliefs, and others who share my faith, to the extent of near incompatibility. A difference of opinion that puts me, and many other young adults, at odds with the so-called Christian leaders on display in the news and political arena.

I am proud however, to say that this particular brand of Christianity, a brand that I still feel is a minority, is not what I learned at Bryn Mawr. Here I believe that we practice something quite different. A religion based on principles of acceptance, and forgiveness, charity, and selflessness. And it has formed a foundation within me that I will be proud to build upon for as long as I live.

Around a year ago I went on a service trip to rural Haiti with the organization BuildOn. Our goal was to build a school for an impoverished Haitian community, in an effort to improve literacy rates and school attendance in the region. The trip was an incredible experience; as *rewarding* as it was eye-opening. But I can also say without a doubt that it was one of the most *difficult* experiences of my life.

I had been fortunate enough to have seen a great deal of the world. But absolutely nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced the moment I touched down in Port-au-Prince in March of 2016. Years spent under the control of an inefficient government stemming from a series of failed elections, compounded by the devastating impact of the 2010 earthquake had resulted in a standard of living that was difficult to say the least. You can hear about it as much as you please, but until you witness it yourself it is impossible to comprehend. Dilapidated homes, streets lined with trash and human waste, unclean drinking water, and over-crowding. I was physically moved by the calamity of the situation, and felt a strange, indescribable guilt for how privileged I was. How all my life I had taken my extraordinary, *extraordinary* blessings for granted.

The next day we traveled nearly 8 hours over unpaved roads to a small village where we would be staying for the next week. I would like to stand here today and tell you that I arrived energized, and eager to help.

But that my friends, would be an outright lie. That evening I arrived in the village, I was exhausted, depressed, dehydrated, and deeply, deeply shaken by my experience thus far. I stood in the town center, only half-conscious listening to the mayor and his translator welcome our team, when suddenly, a group of school children stood and began singing to us. Although they sang in Creole, I recognized the tune instantly. It was a song I had sung many times in this very sanctuary, and one of my favorite hymns: *How Great Thou Art*. As the children began the refrain something inside of me stirred. I was hundreds of miles from home, a world apart from my family, and yet already I shared connection with these people. I smiled to myself, and sang the English lyrics under my breath.

Later that night after the sun had set; we were escorted in pairs back to our homes for the week. My roommate Theo and I we were greeted by our host family, and escorted to the bed which we were to share for the remainder of the week. By this time, dehydration and exhaustion had set in full force. I summoned all the strength I could muster and staggered to the backyard, where the two of us took turns dumping cold water over our heads in an attempt to rinse off. With that we hobbled into bed, and without a second thought closed our eyes. So exhausted, that we neglected to set up the mosquito net our leader had provided us.

An hour later in a panic. I was disoriented and anxious. My head felt like it was splitting open and my stomach churned. As quietly as I could, I rolled out of bed and pulled back the rusted latch on our back door. I stumbled blindly through the night air to the back of the yard, and proceeded to get sick. For a moment, I was terrified. What had I gotten myself into? What would happen if I was seriously ill? I began to wonder, “Had I made the right decision coming to Haiti?” I took a few deep breaths to steady myself, and for the first time, glanced up at the sky.

Through my stupor, I saw a boundless black and blue canvas illuminated by a millions and millions of tiny stars. It was absolutely beautiful. There was no light pollution to block them out, there wasn't any sound. It was me and my host family's backyard, and the clear night sky. Suddenly I heard music swelling up from within me: the chorus of "How Great Thou Art." And in that moment, for the first time since my arrival, I was calm. As I looked up into the sky, I began to realize that I wasn't as far from home as I first thought. For in that moment, although I was not sitting in the pews at church, I was absolutely certain that God was with me, the same as ever. And the children in the village who had sang to us, and my host family, although they couldn't speak a word of English were God's children just as I was. And there I was standing under that we stand under today, the sky that the lord created, and I knew that I was not alone. This is the Christianity that learned at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church.

As if by magic, my anxiety and sickness passed over me like a wave. I stood in the backyard looking up at the stars and singing, "How Great Thou Art, How Great Thou Art," and I knew I that indeed, I was not far from home. I wandered back to bed and fell in a deep sleep, not to be disturbed until the morning.

That night I was filled with energy and purpose. These people were as every bit as worth of a quality education as I was, and we were there to work together and make it happen. This is the sense of community and acceptance that I was taught at BMPC.

I think that as Christians, we can all take a lesson from this experience. As a religion we must move towards compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, and love. We must follow the example of Christ, who looked past the words of false prophets, and sacrificed his own life, to teach us how to live ours.

We too must now look past those in the Christian community whose main priorities are to ostracize members of the gay community, dehumanize and disregard refugees and immigrants, shame women who advocate for reproductive rights, and divide us deeper as a nation. For regardless of your political opinions, you are a Christian first, and it is not your job to judge. That is the job of the Lord himself and nobody else. Our job, and our only job is to practice love, do so indiscriminately. And here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian that is exactly what I have been taught.

I will be the first to admit that I am not a perfect individual. Like all of you I have sinned before, and I will sin again. After all there is a reason we have confession every week, and not only once.

But as Christians we cannot achieve perfection, only strive for it. So every day I will strive for perfection, and try to live by the examples of Jesus Christ himself. I will show love and compassion to my fellow human beings, regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of status, regardless of age, regardless of anything, because that is what the Lord wants of us. I will make mistakes, and ask forgiveness when forgiveness is needed. I will carry my religion with me, the religion I learned right here, as I move on from this phase of life and out into the world, because I believe it provides me with the foundation I need to follow the path of Christ, and be a decent human being. And now more than ever, we must walk this path as one, and show the world the beauty of Christianity, and show all of its peoples that we are a community that stands for the principals of Christ.

On the day I die I will know that I was not perfect. I will know that there were times when I strayed. But I will also know this: each and every day I woke up and I tried to live the way Jesus Christ taught us to. I gave love abundantly, and acknowledged when I was in the wrong. I showed compassion, and forgiveness because that is what Christians do.

And I did so because I learned it here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. And for that I will be forever grateful, so thank you. Thank you very much. Amen.

Davis Burton