

**PHRASES**  
**Matthew 5:13–20**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on February 5, 2017, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*‘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 under foot.*

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

*‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

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I.

In yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan wrote:

We are living through big history and no one here [in Washington] knows where it’s going or how this period ends. Everyone, left, right and center, feels the earth is unsteady under their feet....Everyone’s political views are now emotions and everyone now wears their emotions on their faces. People are speaking more loudly and quickly than usual...the decibel level hits the ceiling right away and stays there....Battle lines are sharply drawn and no one is especially interested in understanding the other side.<sup>1</sup>

I relish the ten or fifteen minutes I have greeting you all at the door before and after worship, and seeing you in Fellowship Hall afterward. I want to share with you comments from various members shared directly with me over the past several weeks:

- I have been working with the Administration’s Transition team and I hope it leads to a full time position.
- My spouse is leaving a position to join Bernie’s senate staff.
- I have accepted a position with the administration because I think they need good, experienced people.
- My spouse is considering leaving the firm and going into immigration law.
- I have been as happy as a clam since November 9.

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<sup>1</sup> Peggy Noonan, “In Trump’s Washington, Nothing Feels Stable,” *The Wall Street Journal* 2/4/2017.

- My internist recommends 12.5 mg of Benadryl for sleeplessness... it works!!!!

I know members of our congregation who attended President Trump's inauguration. I know members who marched the next day. I wouldn't be surprised if I found someone who did both. This range of political opinion and involvement is one of many reasons it is a remarkable honor – and a challenge – to serve as a pastor in this congregation.

## II.

During this season in which “big history” is being made, the churches of Jesus Christ that follow the liturgical calendar are spending time with the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week we heard “The Beatitudes” – which at first glance are a bit hard to classify as “big history” in any traditional sense:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.<sup>2</sup>

Today we have just heard Jesus' words that immediately follow the Beatitudes:

You are the salt of the earth;  
 But if salt has lost its taste,  
 How can its saltiness be restored?

...

You are the light of the world.  
 A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.  
 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,  
 But on the lampstand,  
 And it gives light to all in the house.  
 In 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.

“The light of the world” and “a city on a hill” are phrases we heard in Sunday School as children and then in American history classrooms in high school or college. “The salt of the earth” is a phrase our parents used to describe family members or perhaps neighbors who are quiet, unassuming, solid, reliable.

As I said last Sunday, when Jesus uses these phrases, he is speaking to the four disciples he has recently called – Simon and Andrew, James and John<sup>3</sup> – and to a larger set of followers who fan out from them on the mountain on which he has assumed the rabbinical position of *sitting* so that he may begin his teaching in what is essentially *his* inaugural address, “The Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The full Beatitudes are found in Matthew 5:3-12.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:18-22.

<sup>4</sup> The Sermon on the Mount encompasses Matthew 5-7.

When Jesus says “You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world...you are a city on a hill,” the “you” is plural. Thus, though Jesus himself never uses the word “church,” he is describing what not only the *individual* life of the Christian is to be, but also what the followers of Jesus Christ are *collectively* to be. He is describing the church. Jesus draws these phrases of *light* and *city* from the prophet Isaiah:

In days to come [Isaiah says],  
The *mountain* of the Lord’s house  
Shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
And shall be raised above the hills;  
All the nations shall stream to it...  
They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
And their spears into pruning-hooks;  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
Neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob [Isaiah continues],  
Come, let us walk in the *light* of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

At times in its history, the church has aspired to be “the light of the world” and “a city on a hill.” The latter phrase became formative in American history as well, particularly in that religious instinct that was instrumental in leading the original Puritans to settle in the New World.

Before arriving in Massachusetts aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, John Winthrop said to his fellow pilgrims:<sup>6</sup>

...for wee must Consider  
That wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill,  
The eies of all people are uppon us...

But in the Sermon on the Mount, these phrases of “light of the world” and “city on a hill” are balanced by the *most commonly used* but *least understood* phrase in the Sermon – “the salt of the earth.”

“The salt of the earth” is one of those phrases which all of us understand but which none of us can really define.

We use it to describe people that are solid, reliable, caring, good, decent, kind, but not very dramatic, not very exciting, not very bold.

- Rarely are leaders described as “the salt of the earth.”
- No university president is introduced as “the salt of the earth.”
- Few parents brag to their friends at the country club that their son or daughter is about to marry someone who is “the salt of the earth” – unless that son or daughter has previously been married to someone who is far from it.

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 2:2-5.

<sup>6</sup> From John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” written aboard the *Arbella*, on the Atlantic Ocean, 1630, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, (Boston, 1838), Third Series, 7:31-48; available at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Petrarch wrote:

If you want to take the measure of the greatness of a person, don't count the *ships* that have been launched and the *battles* won and the *books* written, but catch the person in that moment of insignificance attending to a matter, *trifling apparently*, and you will have the real revelation of the *character* of that person.<sup>7</sup>

The little things, *trifling apparently*.

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I once heard a powerful lecture and sermon in New York by a scholar/preacher named Renita Weems who halfway through the lecture paused to tell her spellbound audience:

The most important thing I will do today is as soon as this lecture is over fly home to Nashville, hop a cab to my daughter's school, help her into her tu-tu, and watch her dance recital from the front row.

Neither ships nor battles nor books written, but *matters of insignificance, trifling apparently* are what salt the earth so a city can rise on a hill and become light to the world.

### III.

As Jesus talks further, much of what he says involves being the salt of the earth:

.... when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift....

Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

... If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile...

... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

...Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?<sup>8</sup>

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John Winthrop moved from his eloquence about the early Puritans being a *city on a hill* to how to accomplish that:

Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke

And to provide for our posterity

Is to followe the Counsell of Micah,

To doe justly,

To love mercy,

To walke humbly with our God,

For this end,

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Fred B. Craddock, in a sermon entitled "Weighing the Trifles," in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011), 265.

<sup>8</sup> Selected verses from Matthew Matthew 5:21-7:28.

Wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man,  
Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion,  
Wee must be willing  
To abridge our selves of our superfluities,  
For the supply of others necessities,  
Wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together  
In all meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity,  
Wee must delight in eache other,  
Make others Condictions our owne,  
Rejoyce together, mourne together,  
Labour, and suffer together,  
Allwayes haveing before our eyes  
Our Commission and Community in the worke,  
Our Community as members of the same body,  
Soe shall wee keepe  
The unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace...

“Abridge ourselves of our superfluities,” “make others Condictions our owne” – it’s the little things that salt the earth where the city on the hill can be built that lights the world.

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Some of you know that since Maggie and I moved into our home in this neighborhood four years ago, we have lived across the street from the person who has recently been appointed President Trump’s press secretary, Sean Spicer.

For the most part, the people on our street have children at home, and since we are beyond the years for such, given how busy we are working and they are parenting and working, we have not become personal friends with any of our neighbors. But the Spicers live directly across the street from us, and we have had more interaction with them than with others on our block.

- We sometimes share mulch, or at least the intention to mulch.
- We share a common handyman.
- We alternate shoveling snow for the elderly woman living alone next door.
- One Saturday night Maggie’s daughter Hannah and I were trying to move a tall bookcase up our narrow stairway and became stuck. Sean noticed us, came over to help, and it all went much better.

This past week we decided to have removed the giant oak tree that has defined our front yard and to some extent the street for over 75 years. We have been nursing it along knowing that the neighbors have grown increasingly nervous each year.

When Maggie and I left early yesterday morning Rebecca Spicer was loading the SUV for a family outing. We called out to her and pointed to the large portions of trunk that are still in our yard: “We only took the tree out so your children can play in the yard and not sleep in the basement anymore.” She said: “We have taken four oaks out. It never gets any easier. It is sad each time.”

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On the night of November 9, I pulled into the driveway about 10:00 p.m. and saw Sean, as he often is late at night, in jogging clothes, walking the family dog, talking on his cell phone. I tapped him on the shoulder. “Congratulations,” I said. He held the cell phone away and said: “Thank you.”

About fifteen minutes later Maggie drove up. He was still in jogging clothes. Still walking the now well-walked dog. Still on the phone. She tapped him on the shoulder. “I’m happy your family can now have you back,” she said. “Me too,” he said, holding the phone away. But of course, in his position now, they probably don’t have him back.

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I am aware that in this small town known as Washington, D. C., many of us have neighbors who vault to fifteen minutes of fame – some longer – and then return to the blessed obscurity in which most of us live most of the time.

But in our city,  
In our nation and world,  
In our congregation,  
When “everyone’s political views are...emotions”  
And when “the decibel level hits the ceiling,”  
We must *each* live out our political commitments,  
Our moral commitments,  
Our religious commitments  
– As differing as they are –  
As *neighbors*.  
Each of us must express and live out  
Our moral and political passions  
With “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love,”  
As citizens of the this wonderful country  
And as members of this wonderful congregation.  
And we must do so  
At least in this congregation  
As people striving to be *friends*,  
Deep friends,  
Friends who share a commitment to the Messiah  
Who was born in our midst,  
Who was baptized as we are baptized,  
Who was tempted in every way as we are tempted,  
Yet without sin;  
The Christ who died for us,  
Who rose for us,  
Who reigns in power for us,  
Who prays for us;  
The Christ  
Who names us *salt*,  
Who places us in *this city*,  
Who never stops calling us to be  
*The light of the world*. Amen.