

On Being Salt and Light

Sermon 49 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 9, 2020

Matthew 5: 13-20

Vincent Van Gogh is celebrated as one of the most famous and influential artists in the Western world. His artwork, while never fully appreciated during his lifetime, is among the world's most expensive art to obtain. His signature style we now call post-impressionist began a movement that refused to accept the look of traditional landscapes painted with small strokes and muted colors. Van Gogh and his contemporaries employed bold colors, broad strokes, and palpable emotion in their masterpieces.

Van Gogh is remembered not only for his overwhelming collection of art, but he stands out from the rest as the quintessential troubled artist. Behind the famed images lies the story of a man whose life was wrought with pain, rejection, and mental illness. His struggle to find contentment is well recorded. I can remember as a student in grade-school, learning about how he severed his own ear in a fit of mania following an argument with his friend and fellow artist, Peter Gauguin. But among the lesser known stories of Van Gogh's life, are tales of a life-long struggle with his Christian faith that helped him to see – and to show – some of the same problems within the church that Jesus warns against when he speaks to the crowds and to his disciples.

The painting that we see on the screen is one that I suspect you've seen before. It's called "The Starry Night". It's bold scene has been reproduced more times than we can imagine, appearing on coffee mugs and t-shirts worldwide. When we see it, our eyes tend to be drawn to the light of the stars, the moon, and the boldness of the blue waves that seem to be crashing through the sky like the waves of the ocean crash upon the sand. Down below, almost hidden beneath the sky lies a village. In it, the buildings are outlined with bold black lines. If you look closely you can see that many of the windows shine with bright golds and yellows, as if there are lamps on inside the homes. But the lamplights cannot compete with the glimmer of the stars and the moon. They do not dance upon the canvass, demanding our attention. Tucked away in the very center of the scene lies a church, a dark church, without a single light shining on the inside.

I was an early lover of Van Gogh's work. I learned about him in grade school, I had poster prints of his work in my bedroom growing up. And all those times I'd seen this particular painting over the years, I never noticed the church. It is completely overshadowed by the dance of nature unfolding above it.

Some say that this is the artist's way of telling the world about his painful rejection from institutional religion.

Van Gogh was raised in the Dutch Reformed tradition. His father was a minister in the Netherlands and Vincent (along with his sisters and brothers) were raised in and by the church, as most PKs are. Vincent developed a rich faith and a deep interest in theology

and vocational ministry. He wanted to go to seminary but failed the entrance exam and was thus not accepted into the program. After this rejection, he went to Belgium as a missionary to an impoverished community of coal miners. There, amongst the poor, Van Gogh lived a life of self-sacrifice, selling everything he had for the sake of his neighbors.

One of Van Gogh's biographers writes about this period in his life: "Vincent was a generous man. He understood that unconditional love of God extended to unconditional love for others. He would never recognize love that was not an action."ⁱ

Van Gogh poured himself into this community and embraced his calling as a missionary. But eventually, his rough appearance and language got him fired and sent home. This second rejection from the church sent him into a nervous breakdown, a deep depression returned and lingered throughout the rest of his life.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the lights in this church are out.

And yet for us, the obscurity of the dark church feels like a daunting critique. One that haunts us from the past and yet one that feels very contemporary to our own time. Van Gogh saw the church's light diminish with each of his two painful rejections. Today, we know that many have given up on the church as a place for community and belonging. Today, the church is no longer seen as the agent of change that it once was, a church that made the world a better place. Today, the church is no longer known as a beacon of love and welcome, compassion and healing. Many of our contemporary critics identify spiritual, not religious, claiming that the church no longer shines a light... and if it does, it is hidden under the bushels of deceit, hypocrisy, and scandals within.

Jesus saw some of the same issues emerging within his own time, in his own religious landscape. The Gospel reading from Matthew 5 offers a similar insight. But rather than using a canvas and brush strokes, Jesus tells us a story using the metaphors of salt and light.

Salt is a common spice. One that does not do a whole lot on its own (in terms of taste) but it really helps to accentuate strong flavors of foods to which it is applied. Make a bland recipe? Add some salt! It works like a charm. Salt enhances the natural flavors of our foods, helping them to stand out and shine like they were meant to do. Salt also has some practical uses. It is a preservative, it helps to keep food fresh, longer than it would keep alone. You can see the natural parallels between saltiness and discipleship, right?

Salt adds a little flavor, like we are called to add goodness and mercy and kindness to our world.

Salt brings out the best in other foods, like we are called to bring out the best in our neighbors, supporting them, loving them, helping them see that they are God's beloved.

Salt preserves, like we are called to preserve and keep the practice of faith fresh as long as possible.

You can see, Jesus was no fool, salt is a fantastic metaphor for discipleship! But wait... he doesn't affirm the work of the disciples as if a good measure of salt has been applied to a bland recipe. No, Jesus says, "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."

Yikes!

This feels more like a warning than affirmation!

But then Jesus offers a new metaphor, light. And unlike the salt, the light is actually doing its work. The light of a hillside city shines brightly and is not concealed. The light stands out, like a beacon, guiding us in, illuminating the path, helping us to see.

With the stark contrast of the salt that has lost its flavor and the light that cannot be hidden, Jesus is telling his disciples and the crowds that gather around him that if they want to follow him, they will stand out. They cannot blend into the background. Their faith, lived with their lives could not be overshadowed by anything else because then they would be like old salt with no flavor and no impact. They could not be like a light obscured behind a bushel basket. Jesus didn't need disciples who were not willing to let their light shine in the darkness. Their witness would be lost, like the little church in the middle of Van Gogh's masterpiece.

The thing I find most remarkable about Van Gogh's life and story is that even in the face of rejection, Van Gogh found a way to shine his life, to share his gifts, and to live his faith. When he could not find God in the church, because the church had rejected him, he found God in the fields, in the mountains, in the stars. And with the use of darkness and light, he painted his testimony on this canvas, telling a story, offering both a positive and negative example of discipleship.

Don't be like the salt which has lost its flavor, or the church where all the lights are out... what use is that for the future of God's kingdom?

Rather, shine like a lamp placed on a lampstand, ready to illumine the whole house! Shine like the stars which light up the heavens and dance upon the waves of the sky.

Let your light shine, however God has gifted you and called you, because somewhere, somebody is looking at a church where the lights have gone out... somebody is looking toward a dark sky just waiting to see one little star, brave enough to light up and illumine a path forward.

In this church, when we baptize new believers, new followers of Jesus, we bless them as they emerge from the water with the words from this Gospel lesson. “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Go now, and let your light shine.” In those words, there is both a prophetic call and a holy promise. The promise is that God has given each and every one of us a special flavor, gifts all our own, and an ability to – like salt – use those gifts to enhance the gifts of other around us, to preserve and grow faith in our neighbors, to bring out the very best in everyone we meet.

The question is, are we doing it?

In our places of work and play, in the spaces that we occupy in person and online, are we using our gifts to further God’s kingdom, God’s dreams for this world? Does our discipleship lead us to live lives that make our world more loving, more peaceful, and more kind?

God has promised that we can be the salt of the earth, but have we lost our flavor?

And... with that promise is a prophetic calling. A calling to which we say, “yes,” when we enter the waters of baptism with the profession that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is not a commitment that is entered into lightly because we know that it means we will follow Jesus all the way to the cross. This is what Jesus meant when he said just a few verses earlier, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” Following Jesus is not blending into the background, living obscured by the darkness... following Jesus means boldly and bravely shining a light into every dark corner of this world, offering love in the face of hatred, peace in the face of war, and generosity in the face of poverty, and hope in the face of despair.

I wonder...

I wonder if there’s another artist out there today, another painter creating a masterpiece and telling her or his own story of this little corner of Lead Mine and Sawmill Roads. I wonder if somewhere in the story of this Greystone neighborhood, if there might be a church, our church. And I wonder if we were to look upon that scene, would there be any lights on in this little church?

ⁱ <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-profound-christian-faith-of-vincent-van-gogh/106440.htm>