

**Sermon on the Mount -**

**“Salt and Light”**

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*CF526: Congregation as a Learning Community*  
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As I finish this class on Congregation as a Learning Community, I am challenged with the task of writing a paper based on the Sermon on the Mount. The assignment is to write this paper in light of the concepts I have learned in class. Naturally, I pondered such a vague assignment. However, as I began to read Matthew 5 and 6, I discovered that one passage in particular stood out to me – the passage on Salt and Light.

“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. (Matt 5:13)

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a 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.” (Matt 14:16)

After reading this passage I was struck by how these two seemingly different concepts are strung together – someone who is not familiar with this passage might ask “What does salt have to do with light?” The next question one might ask, is what does this passage have to do with creating a learning community in a congregation?

Well, let me start by elaborating on the first question. Salt is a preservative – it is used to keep food from spoiling. It also has a flavor and a taste to it. I am sure I do not need to convince many people of that fact when one considers how often the average American puts salt in their food. In this passage, the question is asked, “...if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” Jesus was asking a rhetorical question as you will see in the next part of this verse when he said, “It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” He is saying that once salt loses its flavor, it is no good anymore. Consequently, it will also lose its ability to act as a preservative.

Immediately thereafter he changes his analogies by telling his disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house.” I think it is interesting that a new analogy is used when the old analogy has been proven ineffective at its original task – perhaps this is the point. When an old way of relating is no longer effective, then perhaps a new way of relating is needed. If saltiness no longer works, then being a light to the world will.

This leads me to answer my second question, “What does this passage have to do with creating a congregation of learning communities?” One consistent theme, which seemed to permeate the readings and discussions of what a missional learning community looks like, is where the North American church spends so much of its energy today. So much of present-day church programming revolves around meeting the needs of the congregation members, trying to be the moral police of the culture, and engaging in marketing-style “recruitment” of new members.

However, Guder, like many of the other authors, states that we are living in a post-Christendom society. No longer does the North American church have the luxury of assuming that its culture cares about it – its values, priorities, opinions, people, or relevance. In a pluralistic society, no longer does the fear of God hold any weight in most people’s eyes. In other words, the church has lost its saltiness in Post-Christendom America. However, most of the factors (Enlightenment, modernity, consumerism, individualism, pluralism, globalism, etc.) contributing to that loss were beyond the control of the church – but not beyond the control of an omniscient God. So according to this passage, what do you do with salt when it has lost its saltiness? Throw it out.

However, I do not believe that God has any intentions of throwing out the church. Despite its imperfections, I do believe it does desire to do God's will. So what is the saltiness that should be thrown out? The way the church does business: to focus on programming that revolves around meeting the needs of the congregation members, trying to be the moral police of the culture, and engaging in marketing-style "recruitment" of new members. If the culture does not perceive the church as a "salt" then its attempts at engaging in "salty" activities will be futile.

So the next question would be, "So then what should the church be focusing on?" The answer is simple, "What are the passages that immediately follow Matthew 5:13? – Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. If being the salt of the world is no longer effective, then the church should focus on being the "light of the world." As this passage indicates light is also intended to be put out on display light so that it can allow people to see. Light allows vision. Therefore, instead of trying to follow the culture, the church should be focusing on the true source of light – God.

To me, this is biblical support for what Guder (p. 204) states, is the real mission of the church – to be a covenant community as a sign and foretaste, agent and instrument of the reign of God. When the church stops focusing on trying "recruit" members by catering to their consumerism mentality, and instead focuses on advancing the Kingdom of God by doing God's will, then the church will be able to do things far beyond anything that mankind is capable of imagining. Even in a Post-Christendom society, God is still at work bringing out about his good purposes through his church.

So how does the church be a light to the world? What does the passage say, “let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works.” A person may ask, “So, what are those good works?” Well, that is where the local churches need to ask God what he has in store for it. However, it will likely be something that demonstrates God’s love to the world. Efforts at creating a learning community should be based on the mission to which the Lord has called that church. It should include a holistic and systemic approach to transforming a group of individualistic consumerists, to a group of individual body parts which are interdependent upon each other in serving God’s purposes and taking care of its own.

When the church can do that, then it will do what Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 -- “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.” – When people can see God’s glory in God’s people, then they will be drawn back into the church because then those people will again be able to see the relevance of the God and the church for their lives.