

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Salt, Light, and American Politics

Matthew 5:13-16

As the campaign season nears its end, go back with me to August 24, 2023, when the first Republican presidential primary debate took place. Near the conclusion of that debate, moderator Brett Baier said to the candidates, "In his pitch to get to the Oval Office, President Reagan called America the 'shining city on a hill,' a beacon of hope and optimism." "So, in your closing statement tonight," said Baier's fellow host Martha MacCallum, "please tell American voters why you are the person who can inspire this nation to a better day."

"City on a hill." This little phrase has a history that goes way back beyond President Reagan. It was used by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, John Winthrop, in his 1630 treatise "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop wrote, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." Though historians aren't sure when, or if, Winthrop actually delivered the speech, there's a popular story that he gave it while on a flagship to his fellow Puritan travelers on their way to Salem, Massachusetts.¹

But go back even further with me, sixteen centuries to be exact. According to today's text from Matthew, we learn that the words "city on a hill" were originally Jesus' words (v. 14). The phrase comes from the lips of our Lord in what we often call the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' political platform, where he casts his vision of life in the reign of God. Jesus' declaration begins with the Beatitudes, in which he teaches about the blessedness of life in the kingdom, even if it doesn't look very blessed to the world's eyes. Walking humbly, identifying with the poor, showing mercy, working for peace, striving for purity, enduring persecution—these aren't the kinds of things that most people associate with living the good life. But they are the kinds of things that mark a disciple's life, the life of following Jesus. And when God's promises get completed, and his kingdom is fully revealed, this way of life that looked so unattractive and unimpressive will be shown to have been the truly blessed life.

Then Jesus concludes, and illumines, his opening Beatitudes by telling his followers that when you do these kinds of things, you're being the earth's salt and the world's light. "Salt of the earth" (v. 13) is a phrase that we sometimes use to describe people we view as especially good, people whose values, integrity and way of life make them stand out, in an inconspicuous way, when compared to other folks. But that's not the primary way Jesus is using the expression here. He's not saying to us, "When it comes to good behavior, you all score higher than everyone else." Instead he's saying, "Because you're kingdom of God people, you've got a special job in the world." In other words, it's not about our moral status in the world. It's about our function in the world.

In the ancient world, the focus was on salt's capacity to season, to preserve, and to purify. Thus the problem that arises when salt, as Jesus suggests, becomes tasteless itself. But whatever specific functions Jesus has in mind in today's Scripture, his focus is on the fact that salt isn't useful to itself. Salt's usefulness comes from how it's applied to other things.

Salt that's just sitting in its container, safe and sound, taking up space in the cabinet, isn't really being salt. It's only salt, in the fullest sense of the word, when it's put on or put in something else. That's when it accomplishes its purpose. And our purpose as disciples isn't just something to be accomplished among ourselves, but in the larger world. Jesus calls us the salt *of the earth*, which includes our society, our nation, in its public life.

Considering the contentious and divisive nature of politics, it's tempting to pull back from or avoid involvement in public life. Politics can seem like such a nasty business that it looks more appealing to just sit on the sidelines. But that's not really an option for followers of Jesus. Notice that when Jesus launches his ministry and lays out his kingdom vision and values, he doesn't really give us much latitude about who we are and what we will be. As one preacher has pointed out, "Jesus doesn't say, 'If you want to become salt and light, do this' Or, 'Before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you'" Instead, Jesus tells us, "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world. That's the way it is and that's the way it will stay. Period."²

That includes who we are as disciples in the United States. By giving us this identity, by naming us as salt and light, Jesus blesses us and commissions us into the world he has come to redeem, including America. True, the world into which the first disciples, and the early church, were sent, was very different from our form of government. The early Christians had little political power. But still, they were called to live out the tension that comes with being part of an earthly state while at the same time being citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

We have the same call to discipleship, but in a different setting. In the context of a government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people," we need to take the identity Christ has given us and flesh it out through our active involvement in our country's political life. Remember that you and I live under a government that affords all of us the opportunity to use our voices and our votes to influence policies that affect not just ourselves but the well-being of others, those whom God calls your neighbors. So as one person has summarized it, "The question is not 'Should Christians engage in public life?' but 'How can Christians imitate Christ as we engage constructively in the conflicts of democracy?'"³

Notice how democracy assumes tension, disagreement, and conflict. Our nation's diversity, sociologically and ideologically, makes for deep convictions, clashing perspectives, and strong opinions about what needs to be done, and who gets the authority to do it. And the issues being debated are critical—economics, immigration, regional wars, abortion, health care, the environment, national security, and so on. All these debates call for the presence and involvement of people whose lives are centered on Christ and his kind of kingdom.

But just because disciples share a common faith in Christ doesn't mean that all followers of Jesus will reach the same conclusions about policies and priorities. The fact is, there are thoughtful, faithful Christians on various sides of our national debates. Aligning one's life with the reality of God's reign doesn't lead all believers to the exact same opinions, the exact same agenda, or the exact same candidates. In this house of worship here today, there are probably conservatives, moderates, and liberals. There are Trump supporters and Harris supporters. There are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. But all these positions and affiliations, while important, aren't the most important thing about you. The most important thing is who Jesus tells you that you are—salt and light. And different disciples will arrive at different decisions about what that identity looks like in our current political environment.

I like the way that Eugene Peterson renders Jesus words in today's Scripture: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!"⁴

As I said, faithful, thoughtful Christians can disagree about the best way to shine in our nation's public life. And that's okay. Vigorous, often intense, debate is good and healthy. But what isn't okay is the way that legitimate, lively debate can turn into name calling, personal attacks, and character assassination, sometimes even between and among fellow believers. We who confess Jesus Christ as Lord can get swept up in all the hatred, vitriol, and nastiness, which only harms our work and our witness. It's hard to be light in the public square when darkness shapes our hearts and drives our words.

It's also hard for us to be light if our main objective is just to gain and exercise power. True, who gets elected, and thus gets to govern, matters. The policies and programs they pursue matter. So Christian presence and influence in public life matter. But if our influence has more to do with getting our hands on power, or thinking that we can somehow usher in the kingdom of God primarily through political activity, then our way can end up looking more like the way of the world than the way of life Jesus envisions and announces in the Beatitudes.

When we "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (v. 6), and pursue that desire through selflessness and sacrifice, we're more aligned with the will of God revealed in Jesus, who shows us that God's will is for us to love him and love others. And being engaged politically is one of the ways we do that. As Michael Wear has put it, "Christians care about politics because we care about our neighbors and our communities. And political decisions impact the well-being of our neighbors. As a citizen, you do not choose to have political influence; you already have it. Politics is within your kingdom."⁵

For disciples of Jesus, that's what it all comes down to, namely, stewarding our responsibilities by proclaiming and practicing God's kingdom, in the midst of this present world's kingdoms, including the United States. Remember that the Beatitudes, and the entire Sermon on the Mount, flow out of the fact that in Christ, God has come to bring his righteousness and justice, to set things straight, in his lost and rebellious world. The kingdom, the reign, of God has been inaugurated, and we actively await its full revelation when Christ comes again.

This reality, summarized by our confession, "Jesus is Lord," is what frames all our forms of witness in the world, including our political witness. Part of what this means is that we never completely identify any present kingdom, including America, with God's kingdom. Nor do we give our greatest devotion to, or place our ultimate hope in, any particular political party, movement, or leader. As the psalmist reminds us in our earlier Scripture reading, "Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save" (146:3). This doesn't mean that elections don't matter. Who gets elected does matter. Particular people's lives, and the lives of particular groups of people, here and around the world, will be different in certain ways based on who wins and who loses. But who we disciples are, who Jesus tells us we are, will be the same. We'll be salt and light between now and election day, on election day itself, and after election day too. And the ways we illumine our society and our culture won't ultimately be for personal glory or national glory, but for God's glory. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

¹ Kaitlyn Scheiss, "Politicians, You Keep Saying 'City on a Hill.'" Christianity Today. August 25, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/08/gop-president-debate-republican-candidate-christian-nation/> (October 29, 2024).

² David Lose, "Salt & Light." Working Preacher. January 30, 2011. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/salt-light> (October 30, 2024).

³ Justin Giboney, "You Are the Light of the Public Square." Christianity Today. October 8, 2024. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/10/you-are-the-light-of-the-public-square-evangelicals-diverse-democracy/#:~:text=In%20this%20series.%20The%20Christian%20public%20witness%20has%20raised%22a> (October 30, 2024).

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 16.

⁵ Quoted in Michael Reneau and Daniel Darling, "Why Politically Engaged Christians Are Good for Our Politics." The Dispatch. October 20, 2024. <https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/dispatch-faith/why-politically-engaged-christians-are-good-for-our-politics/> (October 31, 2024).