



1506 Orchard Terrace
Linden, NJ 07036-3807
908.486.3073
908-386.3079 Fax
www.lindenpres.org

Pastor:
Rev. Dr. William C. Weaver
Manse: 908.925.4939

Sunday, February 07, 2010

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 17: 5-10
Psalm 1
Luke 6: 17-26
I Corinthians 15: 12-20

Sermon Title: "Get the Valuables Out of the Vault!"

Sermon Topic: The Sermon on the Mount: A "Wake Up Call"

Sermon Purpose: To share the Call to spread God's Word, and not "Let George do it."

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Sermon Prayer: Holy God of love and of strength, you have told us by your prophets and by your poets that the important thing is to have our roots close to the stream of your living water, close to your Spirit, close to your presence, your refreshment, your Life, and to your Will. Though our roots we draw into ourselves who we will become, and we feed our souls and our minds. Our roots ultimately determine our fruits, and how we will survive in times of drought, wind, and flood. Be with us, now, as we draw, again, from the source of Life, as we study your Word and as we evaluate our lives of faith and service. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

It can be such a wonderful thing just to be alive! But, sometimes, we forget that. Maybe this recent news story will brighten your day and make life seem a little more worth living.

It seems that rather than using armored cars and bank bags for deposits, many fast-food restaurants move their daily receipts by putting the money in regular carry-out bags, sending an employee through the drive-thru, and having him (or her) keep on driving ... to the bank.

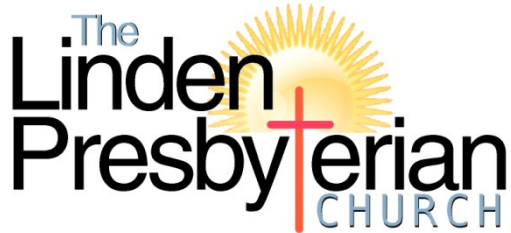
Not long ago, it seems a McDonald's did this but the person at the window gave the bag containing the money to the wrong person! The daily deposit was given to an ordinary customer! Imagine ordering an "Extra Value Meal", going around to the drive-thru window, paying, and then being handed a bag stuffed with **thousands of dollars!** Folks, I don't know about **you**, but the last time I looked at **my** bank account, **I** deserve a break today!

The point, here, is that money **is** a valuable commodity in our society. In Jesus' day, while money was important, there was something even more critical: salt. A person going to a drive-thru window, in Jesus' day, and accidentally receiving salt would have been just as thrilled as that modern, surprised customer at McDonald's. (By the way, it's been two years so far, and that lucky person is still out there and remains anonymous.)

Here, in Luke, Jesus gives a truncated version of the longer Sermon on the Mount that we find in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus speaks about us being the "salt of the earth." Yet, in Luke, the overall theme of being worthwhile, of 'counting' with God is important both as it relates to the salt theme and to the theme of the poor and the dispossessed being the most important people in the Kingdom of God.

In Jesus' day, without salt, there could be no life because salt was used to preserve the foods in





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those days before ice making or refrigeration. In a dry, hot climate such as Palestine, all the money in the world could not help you keep your meats fresh. Only salt could do that. That's why Jesus' comment, "You are the salt of the earth" was so important to his listeners – even though it may sound odd to us, in today's world. If he had said something else, something like "You are the bank vaults of the Earth; You are the Fort Knox of the earth; You are the mega-millions of the earth or the Powerball of the earth, it might make more sense to the modern ear. (By the way, it's from these passages that we derive our modern colloquialisms about someone being – or not being – "worth his salt.")

Jesus is demanding several things, here, that we need to explore so our lives truly do take on more value. In these themes of salt (in Matthew) and human worth (in Luke), we find some guidance for the improvement of our life.

First of all, Jesus is being utterly personal.

Jesus always had a way of driving his point home. It sounds as though he's making a general statement about salt. And, it would seem Jesus is telling the poor that they'll be better off "in the sweet by and by." Those who hunger, now, will be satisfied. (But, when? Later?) Those who weep will laugh. (Next week? Or, after this life?) Actually, Jesus is saying to each and every listener: "You count!" "You matter!" "You are important and you are valued." "You are a valuable commodity."

This was an exciting message for Jesus' listeners, back then! The people had been powerless, lacking influence over their own affairs, often victimized by an oppressive government – and Jesus comes along saying, "Your life matters!"

That message is no less valid, today, than it was over two thousand years ago. You are important to God. You are valuable. Too often, the problem is that we hide that valuable commodity in some kind of safety deposit box in some spiritual and emotional bank vault.

We think to ourselves, "God doesn't mean I'm any good. He must mean someone else." **Not so!** You are the salt of the earth! Jesus is being very personal and very direct, here. He's not saying, "Those others – over there – are the salt of the earth. Only the rich and powerful matter to God." **No – it's you, and me, and every person who believes in God's love through Jesus Christ.**

There's a wonderful legend of an Asian potentate who decided to build a magnificent library. Money was no object, so he called in the best architects in the land. Each was asked to tell two things:

- (1) Why should he get the job? And,
- (2) Who was the second-best person for the work?

Guess whom the potentate selected?

You don't always have to be Number One. You can be Number Two or Three, or even Sixteen. That numbering is the world's system, anyway. Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are a valuable commodity."

But, Jesus isn't finished. He doesn't stop there.





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Jesus is also utterly practical.

He is both personal and practical. You and I are the salt of the earth; you and I may be the ones who are reviled for our faith. But, we still need to know that we are important to God.

If, instead, we merely weep and gnash our teeth about how tough life is, well, then, the valuables (you and I) end up staying in that vault: hidden away from the world, with no one knowing our value.

At one time, a group of young actors presented a few plays in what we now know as our Walter Hall. (A few of those young actors later became members and – later - officers of LPC.) What was the very first performance Mystic Vision presented in Walter Hall? (“Godspell”) In that musical, based on the Gospel of Matthew, is one particular song that speaks to our topic, this morning. The “Jesus” character leads the disciples in the lyrics that say,

“You are the light of the world. ...
But if that light’s under a bushel,
It’s lost something kind of crucial.
You’ve got to stay bright to be the light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth. ...
And if that salt has lost its flavor,
It ain’t got much in its favor.
You can’t have that fault and be the salt of the earth.

You are the city of God. ...
But if that city’s on a hill,
It’s kind of hard to hide it well.
You gotta stay pretty in the city of God.

So let your light so shine before men, ...
Oh, that they might know some kindness again,
We all need help to feel fine.

You are the light of the world. ...
But the tallest candle stick
Ain’t much good without a wick.
You gotta live right to be the light of the world.”

Salt must be used before it loses “its flavor,” an ability to preserve. We must be strong people who will proclaim the Gospel even in the face of hatred, discouragement, and opposition. Why? Because we are blessed by God: at all times, not just when we bless him back!

Anything that impedes that process of our strong proclamation in faith has to go – has to be thrown out!



That means, then, that some of our habits may need to be thrown out, friends:

- Our habit of saying, “It’s not my job”
- Our habit of expecting someone else to do it
- Our habit of saying we’re too busy
- Our habit of complaining about someone else’s lack of charity
- Our habit of not even responding when someone asks for an opinion on a bulletin “tear-off”
- Our habit of wanting (even demanding) the services of the church when there’s a crisis, but being among the seldom-seen when all is running smoothly

Friends, all of those habits (and many others) make the salt tasteless and the light becomes useless. Those habits keep you – the valuable person – hidden in the vault, invisible to the world. And when you are invisible, the Gospel goes nowhere.

There have been some people who have said they don’t think this congregation has gone anywhere, the past few years. Could it be it’s because there have been so many who have been trying to keep their salt and their lights in the vault? Those who have shared their light and their salt have certainly seen things happening!

All I know is what God has shown me. Those who have been withdrawing from the regular Sunday gathering of the faith community – hoarding what we foolishly refer to as “our time” – time that God has given us; those who have become ensnared in the web of “fleeting memories of our past glories; those who have made little or no attempt to lay firm foundations for the memories of future generations have all seen a downturn in their physical, in their financial, and in their spiritual security. Many that have become so utterly wrapped up in themselves can’t see the pain and suffering of the people sitting next to them, or even the needs of someone who may be living in the same house with them.

Those same people who refuse to support different projects and programs of the church are the same ones complaining when the project or program is “jettisoned.”

Yes, we still need money in order to pay our bills and to keep things happening around here. But, we also need people to donate a little time, a little “elbow grease,” a little of whatever expertise God has given you; in order to keep those bills at a minimum and still make sure the walls are standing and the heat is on.

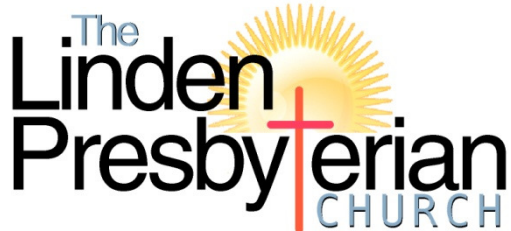
So, what is it that keeps us and our abilities and our talents hidden in the vault?

A cranky man went to his rabbi, one day. The doctors had told him that, despite all his complaints and symptoms, they could not find one thing physically wrong with him. Maybe his rabbi could help him.

As the man and his rabbi chatted, the rabbi – who knew this man to be wealthy – took him by the hand and led him to the window. “What do you see?” he asked.

The man looked out the window and replied, “I see, men, women, and children going up and down the street.”

Then, the rabbi took the man to a mirror. “What do you see, now?”



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"I see myself."

"Interesting," commented the rabbi, "In the window there is glass; in the mirror there is also glass. But through the window you see others; in the mirror, only yourself. The difference is that behind the mirror is a coating of silver that prevents you from seeing others. Maybe all the silver in your life is getting in the way of your vision."

You are valued by God, my friends. And, you are valuable to God. But don't keep yourself (or your wealth of ability) hidden in the vault. When you lose your "taste," so to speak, then you have no value to either the world or to yourself.

Jesus has one more thing to say.

Jesus is also utterly prophetic.

"You are the salt of the earth," he tells us in Matthew. "You should rejoice in your troubles and difficulties as you proclaim the Gospel," he tells us in Luke. Why? So others may see what you do – and in seeing, they, too will be drawn to God. There's the prophecy; there is the demand; there's the task. It's called "Evangelism:" a word so many people fear. "Evangelism" is feared more than any other word, even feared more than "taxes," "commitment," "parenthood," or even "stewardship."

The task of evangelism is linked to stewardship, which – in turn – is linked to education. Education is linked to music which is linked to worship which is, in turn, linked to fellowship. Fellowship is connected to youth work, which is connected to service, and the connections keep going forward. Each one is so much a part of the whole that it simply cannot be separated into a singular unit. It's all a major part of the same piece. We can't keep ourselves, or our talents, or our abilities, or our giving "hidden in the vault." The world needs to hear the message that has blessed our individual lives: the message that we have been blessed!

Will people be drawn to Jesus Christ and to this church by how you and I live, by how we share ourselves, by how we let others know how they are valued, even as God values us?

Will we let our talents and skills - our God-given abilities – out of the vault? Will the Light that is Jesus Christ go forth from this church more brightly than before?

Or, will we stay hidden? Will we fail to proclaim the peace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ to others? Only you can answer that question. But it's an answer that God desperately wants to hear. And he's hoping your response is, "Yes, Lord, here I am! What can I do?" "Here I am, Lord, send me." " ...As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, let us answer your "wake up call" to service and to faith. Enable us to remain close to the stream of strength and life and hope; that stream that runs through our midst because you are in the midst of those who gather in your name to worship, to serve, and to live. Be with us as we face the forces that would prevail against us and which would separate us from you. By the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

