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Matthew 5:13–16, NLT

¹³ *“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

¹⁴ *“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.*

¹⁵ *No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*

700 pounds in the road.

Wendy and I took last weekend off. We went up to Rocky Mountain National Park and had a great time with our kids. We do this twice a year – and have been doing so for at least 25 years. Last Friday as we were passing through Estes, there was a huge male Elk standing in the center of the lane of traffic leading out of town, away from Rocky Mountain National Park. So, while we were able to continue driving our way, into the Park, there was a huge line of cars waiting to leave Estes out of the Park. There was nothing these people could do. This animal was vast in size and had a rack that could shred the front end of a car. He was simply standing there, staring down the driver of the first car in line. We, of course, stopped and took pictures. So did perhaps thirty other people. Everyone was pointing and laughing and having a joyous time. God does want us to enjoy

life, and that is quite literally one of the reasons our planet is covered with mountains and trees and elk. We are not condemned to live in an underground garage, with nothing but cement pillars to stare at. The stain glass windows in this church are a reminder of the beautiful world that God gave us as a temporary home. That 700-pound bull elk is also truly astonishing in its beauty. I almost wanted it to take on that GMC Yukon, just to see what this majestic animal could do to it. Surely, their auto insurance would cover this, right?

Let's talk about our passage. It comes right after the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This long message is perhaps the most important part of the Gospel. This is where Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer, which lays out the core beliefs of Christianity, and which we say every Sunday. It is where Jesus uses elegant, colorful parables to teach us how we should live. The Sermon on the Mount is where we learn humility, forgiveness, and graciousness, where we learn to portray for the world the life and the values of a true Christian. The first verse says: ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.* There are a few things to look at here. Remember that these folks lived in the desert and had no air conditioning. They worked with their backs and their arms in intense heat: they needed to constantly replace the salt in their

bodies. Salt meant survival. They were poor and could not afford costly spices, and so they had no other way to season their food. Salt was also the only way they could preserve meat and fish so that they could eat year-round. Because of the value of salt in biblical times, salt is a very important metaphor in the Bible. It represents life. It represents the continuity of our faith. We are indeed the salt of the earth. We are the foundation of the Kingdom of God.

Let's move to the second portion of our passage. ¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.* We, as people of faith, are to stand on the hilltop and be seen. We do not spread the faith by hiding, by never letting the world see how to live by the teachings of Jesus. We do not serve God by serving our fellow humans if we are unseen and unheard. Indeed, you don't hide a lamp under a basket. You put it on a stand so that the light can shine as far as possible. The most important part of the second portion of our passage is that last verse: *let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.* Why do we bother to show the world how to live like a Christian? It isn't just to spread the faith, to make other

people want to be believers. We also do it to honor God. We let God know that we take seriously the truth that we are made in the image of God, that we are children of God, that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Right now, it is not politically correct to be patriotic in the United States, but I'll say this anyway: we are patriotic citizens of the New Jerusalem. We want to be seen and to make sure that we are seen as Christians. It's the reason why Wendy and I have Christian fish on the backs of all three of our cars, why I wear a cross around my neck. (In case you are wondering, we do indeed have a third car none of you have seen. It is an old minivan that might not survive the trip from Boulder to Pierce/Evans.)

Here is something from 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 4: *For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.* In this part of 2nd Corinthians, which Paul did indeed write himself, he is defending himself from allegations that he is some sort of false teacher. He is emphasizing his purpose, why he gave up a good life to live as a homeless man, traveling around much of the known world. He is telling us why he has dedicated his entire life to evangelizing. He lives only to tell the story of the Gospel to the world. We study Scripture, we read the Gospels so that we can come to know God and the message of Jesus Christ. We don't present ourselves to the world for ourselves.

We present ourselves to the world for God, for Christ. Paul tells us that God has said *“Let there be light in the darkness.”* The world is a dark place, full of evil. It was true then and it is even more true now. Evil has not diminished. Evil increases over time. But despite this, the light that we reflect, the light of God that emanates from us, this can cancel evil. Our presence in the world, our ability to illustrate how to live not for the things of this world, but rather how to live for the things of God’s world – that is enough to combat selfishness, arrogance, and cruelty. We don’t simply spin our wheels in the world, accomplishing nothing. We don’t scream out in the midst of hatred, and then only fail. We do good. There is a purpose to us being here. Every life we touch is an arc of light going outward, moving from person to person. People reflect the values of the people around them. The people with whom we come into contact are impacted by us. Indeed, *God has made light shine in our hearts so we can know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ* – and so that we can spread that glory. This is what Paul is telling the people of Corinth. He is telling them that he is not there to serve himself. He is there to reflect the light of God.

Colossians is a letter that perhaps Paul did not write himself. It does, however, contain solid Christian theology. Verse 4:6 says this: *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to*

answer each person. This tells us that we must treat every person we see as someone unique. We don't make people come to us. We go to them. We don't force people to meet us halfway. We are so concerned with illustrating the life of Christ that we do what we must do to make each person comfortable with us. Our speech is well-seasoned with biblical salt, with what is obviously the truth of God, and so people cannot help but listen and be impacted. This is always in our mind as we go out to the world. Above all else, we are always gracious. That is why we are here. That is why God created us and brought us to faith.

Our passage today, from Matthew, is from the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon marks Jesus' first major public ministry. It is his entry into the world as the Son of God. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we are told this: *When the crowds heard him, they were astounded at his teaching.* That is what we strive to do for those around us. We want them to be astounded at the truth of the Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about marginalized people, poor people, those with little education, people who work with their hands and their backs. These were marginalized people back then. As Christians, we find ourselves marginalized today. It's interesting. The ancient Christians were outsiders, they were looked down upon, they were criminalized. Then perhaps a millennium and a half went by where being a Christian was perfectly fine. It was

the norm in Western society. But it is no longer true. We are marginalized again. In many ways, we are much closer to the early Christians than ever before. We are very much like the Christians of the time of Paul or of the first few centuries after the life of Christ. We have an opportunity to be just like them. We can be the salt and the light, the lone voice of God in the Kingdom of God.

Now, getting back to the elk. That's what we are like. We are standing in the road. We reflect the beauty of God. We are blocking traffic, making ourselves seen. We are 700 pounds of salt and light. We preserve the ancient word of God. We shine the truth for all to see. We do not hide. We do all that we can to be seen. As that line of traffic continued to back up in the face of that massive animal, that's what I thought. It struck me that as believers in a world that once again distrusts, condemns, cancels, and hates us, we are to stand in the road and tell that SUV that no, you are not going anywhere until we have a chance to tell you about the truth, about the beauty of living in the Kingdom of God. We are obvious and unavoidable. We are calm, kind, forgiving, and nonviolent, but you will indeed notice us. We will show you how a Christian lives.

Last weekend in Rocky Mountain National Park was apparently the right time of year to see a lot of elk. They were clearly very used to people; they seemed to be somewhat domesticated, standing and laying around the ballfield,

strolling around the deck of our cabin, coming surprisingly near the line of stable horses as they sadly marched by. We could hear the male elk bugling at night. It got me thinking about animals in the Bible. Here is something from the Book of Job. Job, of course, is a totally righteous man who believes in God and lives by God's command. But still, God allows Job to have his faith tested. He suffers gruesome events, including the slaughter of his children, but he never stops trusting God. Here is God talking to Job in Chapter 39:

- ¹ *“Do you know when the wild goats give birth?
Have you watched as deer are born in the wild?*
- ² *Do you know how many months they carry their young?
Are you aware of the time of their delivery?*
- ³ *They crouch down to give birth to their young
and deliver their offspring.*
- ⁴ *Their young grow up in the open fields,
then leave home and never return.*
- ⁵ *“Who gives the wild donkey its freedom?
Who untied its ropes?*
- ⁶ *I have placed it in the wilderness;
its home is the wasteland.*
- ⁷ *It hates the noise of the city
and has no driver to shout at it.*
- ⁸ *The mountains are its pastureland,
where it searches for every blade of grass.*
- ⁹ *“Will the wild ox consent to being tamed?
Will it spend the night in your stall?*
- ¹⁰ *Can you hitch a wild ox to a plow?
Will it plow a field for you?*
- ¹¹ *Given its strength, can you trust it?
Can you leave and trust the ox to do your work?*

*¹² Can you rely on it to bring home your grain
and deliver it to your threshing floor?*

In talking to Job, God uses the mysteries of animal life as a primary example of the mysteries of the earth. God is telling Job, telling us, that the world around us, the experiences we must face are far too complex and varied for us to control or predict. We should simply trust God to see us through. I think that society's determination in our age to control the earth, to find scientific explanations for everything, to watch Youtube videos in order to understand everything we come across, is a big part of the reason why Christianity is no longer so popular. People want to mold, manipulate, and manage the planet. But Christians accept mystery. We know that it's best to let God control the universe and for us to live properly within it. We know that you can certainly have too much cement and steel and glass – that it's best to leave God's creations alone. We are that giant elk standing in the road, telling everyone about the natural beauty of living the way God made us to live. Please pray with me.

God, let the world see us as natural as that 700-pound elk that was not going to let that GMC Yukon pass by. But like that elk, let people be joyful at encountering us. Let them study us. Let them learn from us how to live in the Kingdom of God.