

It's hard to know for sure exactly which hill Jesus and his disciples climbed for "the Sermon on the Mount." The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills, and it could have been any one of them. More likely, it wasn't just in one place on one day. Matthew, after all, is reconstructing what we call "the Sermon on the Mount" some fifty years or so after these events took place and Jesus probably went away with his disciples to escape the crowds more than once. So maybe they went to various places around the lake, or maybe they did have one favorite spot. Either way, he taught them over time, and they remembered what he said; eventually the disciples passed those teachings on to the second-generation disciples who wrote it all down.

Even so, since the fourth century, pilgrims who have traveled to the Holy Land have claimed one particular place as the Mount of the Beatitudes. Whether or not it was originally *the* holy place, it has without a doubt *become* a holy place as pilgrims from north, south, east and west have gone there to pray for at least sixteen hundred years now. It is what is sometimes called in the Celtic spiritual tradition, a "thin place" where the hills are alive with the sound of music.

The current church on that site, built in 1938, is run by the Franciscans. It's a quiet and peaceful place that overlooks the lake, and as you look down the hill you can see so many of the places prominent in Jesus' ministry, including Capernaum, where he made his home. The gardens at that Church of the Beatitudes are meticulously kept and you can walk and think and pray. It's quite conducive to "considering the lilies of the field" and the "birds of the air." So whether or not it is *the* place, I can attest to you that it is holy ground.

On the warm afternoon I spent there just over a year ago, there was a large group of Chinese Christians who beat us there. Their spirituality was not nearly as contemplative as our group's; in fact they seemed downright boisterous! But as I watched them posing for a group photo, I was profoundly conscious of the fact that it cannot be easy being a Christian in China, and clearly being able to come as a group to the Holy Land made their hearts glad; and that made my heart glad too.

Last weekend we heard those same blessings read here, in this thin place we call our parish home. *Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*

Today's reading is a continuation of that time apart, as Jesus continues to deliver the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples. As Matthew tells the story, *Jesus saw the crowds and was trying to get away...so he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.* It is to them—and by extension to us—that Jesus goes on to say the words we heard today:

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 under foot. 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 lamp stand, 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.

“*You are salt. You are light.*” Elsewhere, he will use the image of yeast as well, the Church as leaven that makes the whole loaf rise. All of these are little metaphors, metaphors of smallness. If you want to make a loaf of bread you don’t just start opening up cakes of yeast. It doesn’t take that much. A little bit of leaven is all it takes.

And we all know the health problems that too much salt can cause us. But in the ancient world, before refrigeration, salt quite literally helped to preserve life. Low sodium diets are good and smart and healthy; but you can’t live with zero sodium. In addition to being a preservative, salt just tastes good—as long as it’s in moderation. The late, great Lutheran Bishop, Krister Stendahl was fond of saying that Jesus told the church to be the salt of the earth, not to make the whole world into a salt mine! His humorous words suggest that our mission is not to make every person on the planet a Christian. Rather, Jesus challenges those of us who claim him as Lord *to act like Christians*. Because “if salt loses its taste, then what good is it?”

Perhaps the most powerful of these metaphors, at least for me personally, is the call to be light. The Church is called to be a light that shines in the darkness, a beacon. You don’t need me to tell us about the darkness of the world. This world is God’s world and it is filled with beauty. But it can also be a pretty scary place: a place of wars and rumors of wars, of violence and degradation. Sometimes it can feel like someone has shut out the lights. Even darker still is the dark night of the soul. There are times in our lives when the darkness seems too overwhelming; and it’s not that external darkness, but the internal kind, that we most fear.

And yet: here are Jesus’ words, echoing down through the centuries from that Galilean hillside to this time and place. We have two choices when the world is dark: we can curse the darkness or we can let our little lights shine. And even though we are prone to forget it sometimes, one little candle in a darkened room really does change the whole space. What was scary and dark can, in an instant, become a holy and luminous place. One tiny little flickering candle can guide us on our way, and helps others find their way as well.

These metaphors for being the Church are about small things: yeast, light, and salt. And I think that is truly good news. Even in that first setting, Jesus is away from the crowds and with just the twelve. Jesus doesn’t start a mega-church; rather, he forms a dozen disciples. Don’t ever doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. The fact that you and I are here today is proof that it can be done, and it isn’t done with smoke and mirrors. It’s done one little step at a time.

From day one of his public ministry around that Sea of Galilee, from the moment he called Peter and Andrew and James and John, he was asking a small group of ordinary people to do extraordinary things—with God’s help. He called them apart to teach them how to be light and salt, and yeast.

And of course that work continues to unfold, here and now, in this place, among us. That is the message, the “good news,” that we are entrusted as members of Christ’s Body to pass along to Grace and Nora as we celebrate Holy Baptism this weekend. They are witnesses to all of us of the wonder and gift of smallness: with their tiny hands and feet they proclaim to us of who we are and what we are about. We don’t need to make St. Francis Church the best parish in all of

Christendom. We just need to be faithful, one day at a time, in small ways. We need to show up and try to live into the promises we renew every time we come to share in the Eucharist: the promises we make to help them and each other to keep growing into the full stature of Christ.

Grace and Nora's parents and grandparents and godparents take on their own responsibilities for doing this. But we promise them that they are not alone, because we know that it takes a village to raise a Christian. And we know that this doesn't happen in an instant, but over time; usually not in big ways but in the accumulation of tiny, small moments.

We live into our calling to be salt, and light, and yeast every time a high school kid takes time in the midst of all the other things he is doing to prepare a Sunday School lesson, and then welcomes a new child into his room with a smile. It happens every time a child is encouraged to be part of a pageant that proclaims the gospel, or when an adult agrees to mentor a confirmand. It happens when someone knits a prayer shawl or bakes brownies for the mustard seed, or sends a card to a shut-in, or picks up the phone to reach out to someone who needs an encouraging word. You and I are not called to do great things. We are called to small things well, the things that are right before us.

Jesus talks in the Sermon on the Mount about the Church's vocation to be salt, and light, and yeast. Elsewhere he talks about the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed. They are of a piece. When we live these words, the Kingdom of God is very much in our midst: and we are transformed and healed and strengthened for the journey. By God's grace, that mustard seed grows into something larger, but the work to which we are called is about the little stuff, the stuff it's easy to overlook. Grace and Nora help us this weekend to remember.

What we discover, or at least what I have discovered as a pastor, is that when we focus on the small things, then together we truly can accomplish even greater things than we had imagined. This is why the Church doesn't need superheroes; just saints—the kind you meet in shops and in lanes and at tea, the kind who are fishermen, and doctors and teachers, classmates, snow plowers and insurance salesmen.

*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.* Don't worry about doing big things. Just pay attention. Just keep listening to Jesus, who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. Just keep on doing the work that God gives you to do today; wherever you may find yourself. Let God take care of the rest.