

You know the foundations of LUMC were rocked on Mother's Day, May 16, 2007. Any guesses why?

That was the day that Melanie overheard Jim Marshall and I talking about the fact that the Denver Broncos were going to be part of the first ever Prime Time football game ever on Christmas Eve - this year, December 24th at 6:00 PM!!!!

Now those of you who know Melanie well know that she, well how do I put this - let's just say she's not exactly a RABID Bronco's fan. And to say that this didn't help matters is understating the point. Melanie was not, and is not, pleased with this new move by the NFL.

Melanie's first reaction on hearing about the Christmas Eve game was to immediately talk about how we could re-arrange the schedule of services to not "interfere" with the Bronco's game. Her next thought was a little less charitable - don't look for a major shift in the Christmas Eve schedule this year!

As an aside, let me let you in on a little joke we were kind of planning on playing on Melanie this fall. Some of you may not know (especially you misfits in the balcony) that in addition to the projections that you see up here - on the platform we have 2 monitors - here and here - so that we can see what's being projected, have the words to the hymns, etc. Now normally, we see exactly in those monitors what you're seeing from your seat. But our friend John Tallerday, up at the video desk in the balcony, has a way of splitting the feed so something different appears in our monitors than you're seeing on the screen.

So this was our plan: during one of the FOUR games in the upcoming Bronco games that conflict with Sunday morning church services by starting at 11:00, we were going to at some point project the game on the big screens while leaving the nice scene of a mountain waterfall on the platform monitors. You know, just for a few minutes until she caught on and everyone joins in hearty laughter!

Well, that might have been kind of funny until May 16th.

Did you catch the part I just said about the FOUR games that will start at 11:00 in the upcoming Bronco's season PLUS Christmas Eve at 6:00 pm?

That discussion Melanie overheard mirrored numerous discussions that we have had as staff and work areas around the church. It usually starts out talking about how some event will impact the church - like the Colfax marathon, or a huge Sunday morning soccer or volleyball tournament. Next we'll inevitably bemoan the fact that those conflicts didn't used to happen. I'm just a little bit too young to start off my conversations with "IN MY DAY", but in my day we didn't have soccer matches or marathons that completely shut off Lakewood's main east-west corridor on Sunday mornings. Now "my day" was say 30 years ago, and that was true.

But "this day" is different, and we as a church are struggling with that - and we're not alone.

How do we present ourselves and compete in a modern marketplace of ideas and activities? Large churches like Cherry Hills Community Church here in suburban Denver or the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City are solving part of the problem by setting up their own soccer and baseball and volleyball and hockey leagues - and NOT scheduling games on Sundays or during church youth events.

But how do we, Lakewood United Methodist Church, ministering in a town that census data tells us has a population which is over 80% unaffiliated with any religious group, deal with this new world of conflicting schedules and ultimately different priorities? We are in a town, in a world, where the fact that scheduling Sunday events might conflict with churches isn't even a blip on the radar screen..

The fact is, we in America, at least outside the Bible belt, are entering into, and really are probably already in, a post-Christian era. So it would do us good to think about how we can be salt and light in a world that doesn't automatically share or even look favorably on a Christian world view. And a good place to start doing that is in the scripture Gary just read for us - in the teaching of Jesus to his followers in a "pre-Christian" world.

The passage we're looking at today from Matthew is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Multitudes are following Jesus and listening to his teaching, and here he climbs up on the hillside and delivers the message. You may be more familiar with the part where he tells the people they'll be blessed if they mourn or are meek, or hunger and thirst for righteousness and this passage comes right after those Beatitudes. I think it might be helpful to take a few moments and look at those comments in the context of biblical times to kind of help us grasp what Jesus was getting at here.

Let's start by talking about salt. You know, I eat a lot of salt - I mean a LOT of salt. Melanie mentioned a couple of weeks ago that there were two types of people in the world: those who think there are two types of people in the world and those who don't.

Well, with all due respect, I KNOW there are two types of people in the world. Those who would line up at the Sweets table at an all you can eat snacking buffet, and those would line up at the Salty table. I'm in line at the salty table.

Now don't get me wrong - I'd probably visit my friends at the sweets table, and just to be polite, sample some of the food there. But I'd LIVE at the salty table. You know, with fresh baked soft pretzels sprinkled with coarse salt, and movie popcorn with real butter and extra salt and nachos and Doritos and maybe some bacon . . . where were we?

Oh yeah, salt . . . and Jesus . . . and biblical times.

You know, salt meant something different to Jesus and those people listening to him that day.

First, it wasn't just a cheap seasoning. I bought this typical round box of Morton's salt the other day in the grocery store for I think 59 cents. It's 26 ounces, so that's 1 5/8 pound, so that comes to about 36 cents a pound (don't think I just did that in my head - I figured it out way ahead of time).

We all know Morton's - it's the all American salt - the salt most of us probably use, the salt we grew up with. Familiar round blue box, aluminum spout, cute little girl with an umbrella. Good all purpose salt - never clumps up, iodized so we don't get goiters. (This was probably packaged in 2006, nice mineral overtones, slightly acidic aftertaste) - oh sorry - just got distracted in the salt again.

For REAL salt connoisseurs though, we have available products like this box of gourmet salt. It's large grain, sea salt. It's not iodized - they warn you about that on the label - don't want you relying on this for your iodine and then getting goiters and suing the company.

It's made by evaporating Sea Water and then processing the remaining salt deposits. This salt has a more pure salty biting taste, no chemical aftertaste, great for dressing salads, topping pretzels, sprinkling on meat or fish before you grill it - any dish where salt is kind of the "star".

This 26 ounce box costs about \$5.00 or \$6.00. It's not the most expensive salt though - that's a french gray sea salt, that costs \$10-12 a pound - Sal de Mar, or some such French name. By the way it's really REALLY REALLY good.

This box of salt in Jesus' time would be worth the equivalent of \$100.00 or more. Salt was incredibly valuable then, not because of it's use as a condiment, but because of its value as a food preservative. Some historians argue that salt was THE precursor to the evolution of civilization because it freed humankind from the bondage to seasonal harvesting and hunting and enabled travel and even encouraged the development of trade routes and cultural exchange.

We know for certain that salt played a HUGE role in the Roman Empire that was ruling Israel at the time of Jesus' ministry. The Romans controlled the price of salt throughout the Empire - taxing it and controlling supply to raise money to fight wars and undertake additional conquests. One of their goals though was to keep the price of salt very low in Rome itself, in order to keep the real "citizens" of the empire satisfied.

You know, as kind of an interesting fact, before you run off to Village Inn or Perkins for breakfast, the upper classes in Rome considered eating table salt, like this, sprinkling it on food, as unsophisticated and the mark of a kind of country bumpkin. They were too sophisticated for that. Instead, they developed a salt based sauce as a condiment, called garum. Does anyone know how they made garum?

I didn't think so. Hmmmm, I wonder if I should tell you about garum before your breakfast, or after you've already had a couple of donuts?

Okay, if you insist. The Romans would take fish guts, coat them with salt, and leave them out in the sun for several days to, oh let's say ripen. Then they would put that mess in some salt water, and leave it out in the sun for several months to ferment. Then they would filter the solids out,

and the liquid was garum. And it was really expensive, in high demand among the upper classes in Rome, sort of a Roman soy sauce.

Much of the Roman expansion and empirical plans were driven by the desire to establish salt trade routes and open up additional sources of salt throughout the empire. We're even told that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt; in fact that's where the word "salary" has its roots, and it's the origin of the phrase "worth his or her salt". Even the word "soldier" is a French derivative of that Latin root, meaning one who is paid with salt.

So Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is telling those who would follow him to be salt in the world. Salt was a substance of great value, and Jesus was establishing a kingdom bought at a great price, ultimately at the greatest price with His crucifixion. And Jesus was calling his followers to be like salt, to preserve the world, to establish a new kind of kingdom, to work at stopping the decay of world in which they lived.

At the time of Jesus ministry, the world in Palestine and really throughout the Roman empire WAS decaying - much more so than the conflicts we're facing in a Post-Christian America. The Pax Romana, the iron fist enforcement of peace throughout the Roman empire was beginning to unravel. The relatively wise leadership and sort of "pre-democratic" Roman government established under the likes of Julius and Augustus was being replaced with the increasingly tyrannical and insane dictatorships of Tiberius and after Jesus death, Caligula and ultimately Nero.

For the first time, the Roman occupiers were demanding religious compromise from the Jews, pressuring them to acknowledge the deity of the Caesars, and ultimately to worship them. All of this would come to a head in 70 AD with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and early Christians in the siege of Jerusalem and throughout the empire. Those really are the events dealt with in parts of the book of Revelation, as John, continuing the work of Jesus, urges the churches to remain faithful to God, and be focused on being salt in a decaying world, despite the chaos around them.

And as we look at the early church, we find that was what was happening. At a time when Roman and other cultures devalued women to the point of encouraging people to discard baby girls on trash heaps, early Christians were rescuing those same babies, adopting them into their own families, and raising them. They were living the words of Paul, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

Likewise, in those times, there was very little support for widows, for orphans, for those unable to earn wages because of blindness or other health conditions. And among the first acts of the early church was organizing to take care of these people, to serve their spiritual and physical needs - both those within the church and outside it. Because those early Christians took seriously Jesus' command to be salt in their world - to strive to preserve the society in which they lived. Let's turn now to the other segment of Jesus teaching here - to His talk about light.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the

house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” - Matthew 5:14-16

You know, we take light for granted. Do you think if the power went out right now, we could just go on. How would we sing the final hymn without the words being projected? How could you see me up here struggling to read these notes with my bad eyesight compounded by no light.

In these biblical times, light wasn't taken for granted. Jesus refers to a light everyone listening to him would have been familiar with. Houses in that day were MUCH different than what we think of as a typical suburban home. There weren't a multitude of separate rooms for dining and cooking and sleeping and bathing the dog and sewing and watching the big screen television.

There typically was one general room, with areas for cooking and eating and gathering and sleeping, and at night, the whole house was lit by the one lantern placed high in the center of the home, that the family could afford to burn for a few hours. So they understood when Jesus said how foolish it would be to have that light and place it under a cover or a bowl. There would be no reason to even have the light then.

But I think the more interesting of these two analogies is Jesus talking about the city on the hill. You see at the time, Israel was really a grouping of small villages, connected by paths, some wide and well traveled, but many narrow and winding through the hills and mountains. And the people used those paths as they traveled from village to village on business, to see family, or to go on pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Holy Days and religious ceremonies. Often those journeys would take days, and travel in those times was uncomfortable and more importantly, unsafe.

Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. It tells the story of a man who was waylaid, kind of car jacked without the car, on his travels. He was robbed, beaten and left for dead. And that type of story was very familiar to the Jews of that day. So safe travel involved two components:

- Always travel in a large group - NEVER travel alone

And

- Always travel ONLY during daylight - find lodging in a village before nightfall.

The towns and villages of that day were lit up at night. They had torches in the streets and the lights would shine through the window openings in the houses. They lit the towns for safety - to discourage the bandits that roamed the countryside from entering and causing havoc in the town, and even to keep wild animals outside the streets.

So as Jesus told this story, I can imagine those hearing it remembering being on a journey; walking along and looking up as dusk was approaching and seeing the lights of a town on the next hillside, a haven they were drawn to for safety and for rest.

That was what Jesus was calling his followers then to be - a haven of safety and security, drawing people into the fold by their good works and their love.

And that is what Jesus is calling us to be today - salt and light in a world that increasingly needs us to be salt and light - preserving the culture, and attracting people, inviting them to join us on this journey we call Christianity.

In 2003, Pastor Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio didn't follow his normal Sunday routine. Instead he picked up the Sunday paper BEFORE church and read a story about the unbelievable genocide taking place in Darfur, Sudan. And it burned into his conscience.

He told his congregation that day that God had given him a vision that the people at Ginghamburg Church would play a major role in relief efforts in the area, help to preserve the life there and return the refugees to self sustaining dignity. And along with leaders of the church, they developed a program to raise funds for Darfur relief efforts. Working with the United Methodist Committee on Relief, UMCOR, the church implemented an agriculture program that is currently feeding over 40,000 people and has returned over 4,000 people to productive agricultural employment in the region. They have built nearly a dozen "Water Stations", a safe, reliable and always functioning water tower/well that provides clean and safe drinking water to thousands in the area.

And how did they pay for it? Ginghamburg Church started a Christmas Offering campaign they called "It's Not Your Birthday Anyway". Pastor Mike asked church members to donate to the campaign an equivalent amount to what they were spending on Christmas presents. The thought being that you could cut your Christmas spending in half, which was also a good thing, and support the church's relief efforts.

The idea caught on - not only at the 4500 member church, but at Methodist churches throughout the Akron area and even across the nation. Local papers picked up the story and over the past year, many people not affiliated with Ginghamburg Church or with any church, have delivered cash donations to the program.

This past year, in the 2006 Christmas season, the It's Not Your Birthday Anyway campaign raised over \$1,000,000 for relief efforts in Sudan.

Pastor Mike and the members of Ginghamburg United Methodist church are taking seriously Jesus command to be salt in the world.

In late 1993 Billings Montana was a town in turmoil. Billings, a town of about 80,000 people then, had always been known as a typical Western town with a live and let live kind of openness that attracted and appealed to many.

But by 1993, Billings, like many towns in the Northwest ranging from Helena Montana to Cour d'alene Idaho to Spokane Washington, had come under the bullying intimidation of White Supremacist Separatists. Billings had seen racist flyers being distributed downtown, skinhead groups interrupting African American church services, and a general air of tension throughout

the town.

And then, during Hanukkah in 1993, a brick was thrown through the bedroom window of 6 year old Isaac Schnitzer, who had been displaying a menorah in his window as part of the family's observance of the holiday. The Schnitzers were one of about a dozen Jewish families in Billings at the time.

And when Margaret McDonald, a member of Billings First United Church of Christ heard that the police had told her neighbor the solution was not to display the menorah or any other non-Christian symbol, she knew something was terribly wrong in Billings. So she called her pastor, who called other members of the Billings Ministerial Alliance. And they came up with an idea, a plan to deal with the deteriorating civic spirit in Billings.

They decided to print cardboard menorahs and urged their congregation members to place them in their windows as a sign of solidarity with their Jewish neighbors. By the end of 1993, more than 10,000 menorahs were being displayed throughout Billings. And after a spate of broken windows, including windows at First United Methodist Church in Billings where menorahs were prominently being displayed, after a burst of threats and vandalism and attempts at intimidation, those who would spread fear and hate got the message. The "Not in Our Town" campaign spread to towns and cities across the United States and Canada, and offers practical advice and plans for cities dealing with racial, ethnic and religious intolerance.

The Christians of Billings Montana in 1993 made a decision - a decision to be faithful in fulfilling Christ's commandment to be light in a sometimes corrupt and evil world.

And God is calling us, as members and friends of Lakewood United Methodist Church to be salt, to be light, right now, in 2007.

But you know, Jesus words weren't directed at churches. They were spoken to people - to individuals like you and me. This week, as you just saw, a group of members of our church, youth and adults, have said yes to going on a mission trip, to being salt and light to the McCurdy School and Espanola, New Mexico. But it's not Lakewood United Methodist Church riding in that van for hours on the way to New Mexico, it's individuals from this body who said yes.

You know, you can go to the self help section of any big bookstore, browse the course offerings at a local "free university" or watch Dr. Phil enough and you'll find books and classes and programs and tips on how to say no and really mean it, how to set boundaries, how to protect yourself from outside demands on Your life.

But today, my friends, I'm telling you that God is asking you to say yes. Say yes to the new life in Christ that's being offered to you, say yes to the joy of living for something besides yourself, say yes to being salt, to being light in our decaying and hurting world.

I hope you'll take some time over the next few days, weeks and months, to consider how God is

calling YOU to say yes.

Let us pray: