“Salt and Light”  
Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus said.

Our Lord and Savior is also our Master Teacher. He tells us the truth about ourselves in a way that gets into us ... sideways.

The poet Emily Dickinson must have thought about this in the same way. In one of her gems she said:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

We're living in a time when we are blinded by dazzling words that hit us like the noonday summer sun and make us want to cover our eyes. The assault of words from bleary screens and at raucous rallies is a kind of violence in the name of truth that creates more enemies than friends.

We say we want to know the truth, but as Jack Nicholson's Marine character in the movie A Few Good Men said: You can't handle the truth.

Emily's counsel is to tell all the truth, but to do it gently, to go around it as with a circuit, to use subtlety and nuance, to ease into it like explaining lightning to children.

Metaphor helps us tell the truth slant. Robert Capon calls it “bent talk,” as opposed to straight talk that we either tune out of or turn onto without letting it sink in.

Jesus tells us all the truth slant: You are salt. You are light.

Metaphor lets us see things we wouldn’t otherwise imagine. We could say a woman is dependable, or we could say she’s a rock. We could say a man is courageous, or we could call him Atticus Finch. One way of speaking shuts down the imagination; the other opens it.

When we baptize people around here, we touch salt to their lips to let them taste who they are. We give them a candle to take out of the pool to remind them to
shine their light in a dark world so that others may see God by them. We could just tell them to go do good, but the salt on their lips and the light in their hands keep working on them long after they've dried off.

I have a bad habit, according to people who love me, of salting my food before I taste it. I'm not making excuses; I just know everything tastes better with a little salt. Or bacon. You have to be coy about it sometimes, though, lest the cook take offense.

My son, Rhett, and I were in Rome some years ago eating at a trattoria that made the best spaghetti carbonara. When it was delivered to the table, I asked the waiter to bring me some olive oil on the side. Because, well, it already had bacon in it, and olive oil is another one of those things like bacon and salt that makes everything better. No, he said in that indignant way Italians talk to Americans about their unrefined palates. You eat. You eat it the way we make it, is what he was saying. This isn't Burger King “have it your way.” This is Roma.

Salt is a stable compound of positive and negative ions that are polar opposites. These chemical properties allow it to dissolve into any food, bringing out the natural flavors. It's not about tasting the salt, it's about heightening the taste of the food.

Salt was also used in the time of Jesus, before refrigeration, to keep foods fresh—like the fish from the Sea of Galilee right over Jesus' shoulder. He knew that salt seasons and preserves.

Salt was a valuable resource in ancient times. The Greeks used salt as currency to buy and sell slaves, giving rise to the phrase “not worth his salt.” The Romans gave a salarium or salary to those who were “worth their salt.”

So, when Jesus told those people gathered on that hillside to hear his Sermon on the Mount that they were salt, they could taste his meaning. He didn't have to go into a lengthy treatise on how they were to make the conditions of life more livable for people by permeating the social structures of families, commercial life or political life. He didn't have to tell them life is flavored by their presence. You are the salt of the earth. That's all. The truth told slant.
And as for light, well, it’s probably hard for some of us to realize these days just how dark the world once was before the invention of the electric light. Nowadays you have to go on vacation to Big Bend or someplace remote to sense how dark the night can be when the only light you see comes from the moon and stars.

The region of the Galilee in Israel would have been one such dark place—remote enough that villages dotted the landscape and you could go miles without seeing a fire burning to cook food or keep people warm. If you were to come close enough to see a city on a hill with enough population to have many burning lights, you would be able to orient yourself in the darkness.

A city on a hill cannot be hidden. And a light is not meant to be hidden under a bushel but to be shown as through a lamp for all to see.

I have grandchildren who need a nightlight to sleep. I need the dim glow at least of my cellphone to make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night without stumbling. Men of a certain age, don’t you know?!

Light chases away fear and guides our path in the darkness.

Some of us, however, like my wife, who is not here today so I can throw her under the bus on this—please don’t tell her—need pitch darkness in order to sleep. It’s gotten worse over the years. There’s always some rude light ruining the darkness that makes falling asleep nearly impossible. I tell her that’s why God created eyelids. You know, they are like nature’s shades that you pull down at night to block the light. I think hers are translucent. She’s taken to putting little blankets over the clock and anything else that would intrude on the darkness.

But that too is a way for us to think about what Jesus is saying. You are the light of the world is a third-trimester pregnant metaphor. (See what I did there? A metaphor about metaphor?) We may be welcome in the world of darkness or unwelcome. We can give hope to those who fear the dark and we can righteously ruin the darkness for those who want to hide in it.

How do we do this?
I am still thinking of our friend and brother Bill O’Brien, who has gone to be with the Lord. His memorial service will be in this room tomorrow at 1:30.

Bill was maybe the whitest man you ever met. Irish. Light skinned. Prone to skin cancer. He grew up in Texas, a conservative Southern Baptist upbringing that might have shaped him into the kind of person who would turn up with a tiki torch at a rally of white Christian nationalists. But the gospel worked on him and made him someone more like salt and light. When he was directing the Global Center at Samford University and teaching at the Beeson Divinity School, Bill was a regular at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. He visited the museum so frequently, the director asked him to serve on the board. And Bill made it a practice that anyone he invited to campus to speak had to agree to go with him to the museum.

Bill understood that racism is a darkness of the soul that needs ruining by the light of truth. This pernicious stain on the landscape and soulscape of America needs exposing for the lie about the human condition it perpetuates. Ignorance and evil go hand in hand. And both thrive in the darkness.

Jeremy Everett is the executive director of the Baylor Collaborative for Hunger and Poverty. It’s an odd name, I think since they aren't for it, they're against it—hunger and poverty, I mean. But he was telling a group of faith leaders this week at Temple Emanu-El about why he does what he does. Part of it is family legacy.

Jeremy’s grandfather was a pastor in the small southern Arkansas town of Springhill in the 1960s. After church one Wednesday night, the preacher and his family were driving home when they saw a fire in the distance. As they got closer, they were horrified to see a cross burning in the front yard of the house he knew belonged to an African American family. The fire lit up the night sky. Jeremy’s granddaddy stopped the car and told his son, Randall, to go check on the house. Randall would grow up to become a Baptist pastor, then the head of Texas Baptists, and now the founder of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative to fight modern-day slavery and persecution. But that night the boy Randall entered the house to find children in a
back room, huddled together in terror, their parents still at work somewhere else. He assured them they would be okay. Outside, Preacher Everett was putting out the flames on the cross. Randall watched his daddy as he looked across the road into the woods where he knew the so-called Christian Klansmen were hiding. Some of them were probably deacons in his church. Cowards! Cowards! he yelled. Come out! How can you use the symbol of love as a symbol of hate?

You are the light of the world. That’s the way to be the light.

A new Islamic Center was built in Frisco in 2007. Frisco has been one of the fastest growing cities in America for years, and surprisingly it’s a more diverse suburb than people realize. When the Center opened, the country was still reeling from the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. Muslims in this country lived in constant fear of retaliation. The Center held a picnic of sorts and invited the community in order to dispel some of the darkness about Islam. Bill O’Brien was living in Frisco at the time, active in his “legitimate” son-in-law’s church there. Of course, he went. He told me about taking off his shoes, sitting down on the lawn, crossing his legs and watching. He stuck out in that crowd of darker-skinned immigrant Muslims despite his attempt to blend in. It wasn’t his being white that brought light, though. It was the light of his quiet and humble presence. Someone came to speak to him, wary at first, probably worried. The man asked why he was there. I just want to be a good neighbor and welcome you to the community. “Are you a Christian?” the man asked. I don’t like to use that term, Bill said. It’s been misused to provoke fear in others instead of love. I just call myself a Christ-follower.

And there it is. You may not think you can effect much change in the world by your efforts to be salt and light. But I remember President George H. W. Bush’s phrase “a thousand points of light.” He was trying to highlight the work of those quiet servants of humanity who are the salt of the earth and light of the world. They may not get the attention of the masses that a few do by their grand-scale work. But when a thousand points of light aren’t hidden
under a bushel or a blanket, 
together they light up the world.

You, whoever you are and 
wherever you are—you, both the 
singular you and the plural you 
as the church—you are the salt 
of the earth and the light of the 
world. Go now and be who you 
are. Amen.