

SHAKE AND SHINE

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. (from Matthew 5:13ff)*

Earlier this week, amidst the fog of the 24-hour news cycle, one story stood out for me more so than most of the others. The story concerns a woman named Noor Salman, who is the widow of Omar Mateen. You will recall that Mateen was the perpetrator of the massacre at the nightclub Pulse in Orlando last June. Before he himself died in a hail of police bullets, Mateen, a 29-year old Queens native, had declared allegiance to ISIS, killed 49 people, and wounded 53 others. It was the deadliest shooting rampage by a lone gunman in American history.

Shortly after her husband’s crime, Noor Salman moved with their 4-year old son to the Bay Area to be near her family. But she could not elude the questions that investigators were increasingly asking of her. Specifically, did she know anything of Mateen’s intentions? If so, why did she not speak up and alert the authorities? Since the attack two strikingly different profiles of Noor Salman have emerged. Federal prosecutors point to evidence suggesting she not only knew of her husband’s plans, but helped him scout Pulse in advance. They claim that on the fateful night he left to commit the carnage, she knew where he was going, and knew that he was carrying guns and ammunition in his backpack. Now the prosecution has convinced a grand jury to indict Salman, and deny her request for bail.

Salman herself claims that she knew nothing of what Mateen was plotting, and therefore is innocent. What is more, her defense lawyers will argue that Mateen was an abusive husband who beat and terrorized his wife into submission. Even if she had known of Mateen’s general inclinations – which they assert she did not – for a host of psychological reasons she could not have participated in any elaborate plan. She is being made into a scapegoat. So the case will go to trial, and the jury will have to decide whether she was a victim, an accomplice, or perhaps worst of all: a bystander who could have sounded an alarm to prevent the slaughter ... but did not.

Jesus said, *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world. No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand. What did Jesus mean when he used the metaphors of salt and light to describe his disciples? Was he giving them a compliment or a commission? If I were to come up to you later today and say, “You are the salt of the earth,” my guess is that though your brow might furrow a bit, you would generally take it as a compliment and utter a somewhat guarded, “thank you.” Likewise, if I were to greet you and say, “You are the light of the world,” you would stand taller and receive the words as high praise – though you might secretly be worried that I was exaggerating or being sarcastic. *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.* Is it a compliment? Or is it a commission? I believe that the answer is yes. The answer is both compliment and commission, with an emphasis on commission. If Jesus were, in fact, conferring on his listeners some lofty status, he was not intending it to be for their mere enjoyment. He was doing so because he had a purpose in mind for them. Salt and light have a purpose.*

Since ancient times people have always used salt for two general purposes: as a seasoning to bring out the flavor of food, and as a preservative against decay. It seems to me that salt’s use

as a preservative was especially important, and may be what Jesus had in mind. In his time and place people lived close to the land; meat and fish, unless consumed, would spoil quickly and become inedible. Modern methods of food preservation such as canning and refrigeration hadn't been invented, and people knew nothing of microorganisms, nor how they break down organic matter. But they had discovered that salt greatly prolonged the shelf-life of the food. They didn't know why, but salt held back the decay. Salt performs a conservative function. It arrests the progress of death and decomposition, which is the devil's work. Thus, salt participates in holiness. Salt is the essential ingredient in holy water, which is used in exorcisms. The devil doesn't like salt. What have people done when they think the devil is behind them, tempting them to do wrong? They throw a pinch of salt over their shoulder to drive the devil away. Granted, a fine line runs between the superstitious and the symbolic, but you see how the metaphor functions. You are the salt of the earth. You are to be a bulwark against the devil's doings.

You are the light of the world. The purpose of light hardly needs explaining, but the metaphor of light, coupled with Jesus' words about salt, conveys to us a similar commission. Salt holds back decay, and light dispels darkness. Anyone, Christian or not, who shines a light onto the dark schemes of evil and injustice is living into Jesus' commission. Light also leads the way to the city of God. Thus, if salt is conservative, light is progressive. It takes both. *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.* When Jesus first spoke these words, his Jewish hearers would have taken his reference to a city to mean Jerusalem, the city of God. To set Jerusalem in its prominent place, on a hill for all to see, would require them to be salt and light. For us, our commission as followers of Jesus is the same: to shake the salt and shine the light. No, Noor Salman is not a follower of Jesus. But the agonizing question remains for all people of good will regardless of creed: when is it time to be salt and light? The time is now to sound the alarm, shout out, and not hold back. If you see something, say something. Let's shake and shine!

Hold on a minute! Not so fast. For one thing, you may feel completely inadequate to the task of holding back the evil powers of this world. You may feel underpowered to dispel the darkness of those who corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. What is more, reading Jesus' words in the larger context of Matthew might only confirm your fears. Who is the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Well, it's the same people to whom he spoke the Beatitudes: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted, the reviled. Yes, you've got the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger for righteousness in the lineup as well. But all in all, it's hardly the world's idea of a Super Bowl champion.

Also, the world-wide church is divided, hardly of one mind on anything. Salt and light, conservative and progressive impulses often have us pulling in opposing directions when the truth lies somewhere in the middle, as it usually does. Case in point, the Corinthians. The Corinthians were divided. Some years after the Apostle Paul had founded the new church in Corinth, the congregation had devolved into factions quarreling over personalities and practices. How did Paul respond? With letters: lots and lots of letters. In fact, the Corinthians wound up with two whole books of the New Testament named after them, and let no one think this was an honor! If Paul sent you a letter, it probably wasn't to enthuse over how successfully you were following Jesus. In the portion of one letter we heard today (I Cor. 2:1-16), Paul wrote to remind them of what should come first in their life: *For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.* Paul promised the Corinthians that if they sincerely set Christ and his cross at the heart of everything they did, God would give them the Spirit. And through the Spirit, God would reveal to them *what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived.* God would give them the mind of Christ to help them navigate their way through difficult, fractious times.

If you and I truly believe that Jesus commissions us to be salt and light in the world, then we must conclude that God cares about how things unfold on this earth, and not only cares, but intervenes. In fact, God gets personally involved in breaking oppression, setting the captives free, housing the homeless, and clothing the naked. How? Does God tinker with the laws of nature? Does God stop bullets in mid air? Is God given to the grand interventions that leave no doubt who's in charge, and assure that history goes the way he wants? I'm not putting any limits on God's divine ability, but it seems to me that God most often chooses a different way. God, who is Spirit, merges his Spirit with our spirits to raise up willing people to be salt and light and accomplish his purposes on earth. God sent the Spirit and raised up the prophet Isaiah to be salt and light and rail against the injustices taking place in Jerusalem, the city of God. *Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet (Isaiah 58:1-12)!* God sent the Spirit and raised up the Apostle Paul to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, and establish churches wherever he could travel.

I believe the same Spirit of God is at work today at Grace Church. Today is the Annual Meeting of Grace Church, so it's an appropriate moment for us to take stock of how we shake and shine. It was in 1808 when Trinity Church established us downtown, directly across the street from themselves. Since then we've moved uptown, built this inspiring edifice to the glory of God, ministered to waves of immigrants entering the United States through Manhattan, established Grace Church School, and in partnership with them, the GO Project to reach children and families falling through the cracks. Now today we're building a house with Habitat for Humanity, and we've discerned the call of God to undertake another phase of restoring the glorious interior of Grace Church. God, who is Spirit, seeks to merge his Spirit with our spirits, and raise up willing people to be salt and light to accomplish his purposes on earth. It is why we pray, why we receive the Sacrament, why we read and study the Scriptures: to receive the mind of Christ, to merge our spirits with God's Spirit and say, "Here we are, Lord. Send us."

I remember seeing a comic strip years ago that made a lasting impression on me. I don't recall the source, but it might have been *The Wizard of Id* or *B.C.* by the cartoonist Johnny Hart. It showed two men walking along and one says to the other, "One of these days I am going to ask God why he doesn't put a stop to war, and suffering, and poverty, and injustice." The other man replies, "What's holding you back? Why don't you ask God why he doesn't put an end to war, and suffering, and poverty, and injustice?" And the first man concludes, "What's holding me back is that I'm afraid God will ask me the same question."

Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*"

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