



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
5 February 2023  
"Salt of the Earth"  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Matthew 5:13-20

**Matthew 5:13-20 (NRSV)**

5:13 "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.

5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

5:15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

5:16 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.

5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

5:18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

5:19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

This week, I felt a dissonance ringing throughout, as if two opposing notes were struck at the beginning and then held on as the days went by.

At the beginning of the week, on Monday, being the thoughtful, well-informed Presbyterian minister that I am, I listened to *The New York Times* podcast, “The Daily,” during my commute.

The episode was entitled “The Death of Tyre Nichols.”

As you can imagine, it is a heartbreaking account of the video footage released a week ago Friday. Tyre Nichols was a 29-year-old Black man murdered at the hands of the Memphis Police department.

The podcast is a conversation between two men: Michael Barbaro, *The Daily*’s host, and *The Times* Southern Bureau Chief, Rick Rojas. The opening of the podcast, where Rojas describes Tyre Nichols life, prior to his encounter with the police, has stayed with me ([play audio clip](#))

**Transcript:** *So Tyre Nichols was a 29-year-old man who lived in Memphis. He was Black, and his mother described him as living a kind of simple, pleasant life. Every day, like clockwork, he would wake up at 8:30, and he would go to the same Starbucks and get the same drink. He had been working for about nine months at a FedEx facility in this city. And he seemed to be doing well on all accounts.*

*He loved to skateboard, and he was a regular at Shelby Farms, which is this really sprawling park just outside Memphis. He’d go almost every day, either for skating or to photograph the sunset. He was an amateur photographer. And he had a four-year-old son. And he just seemed like someone who was like a typical 29-year-old who was finding his way and building a life for himself.<sup>1</sup>*

Do you hear the heaviness of their words? I’m especially struck by Michael Barbaro’s sigh, that ‘hmm,’ upon hearing about Tyre Nichol’s love of photographing the sunset.

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily, “The Death of Tyre Nichols.” *The New York Times*. January 30, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/30/podcasts/the-daily/tyre-nichols-death-memphis.html>

And I was struck, again by the fact, going about my day to day, listening to a podcast during my commute, that we live in a society that often and without hesitation, puts young men like Tyre Nichols to death for no other reason than their race.

The days passed - on Wednesday morning, I was back to my commute. Again, I returned to The Daily, this time a conversation with Michael Barbaro and a business reporter named Ben Casselman. The episode is entitled, “The State of the US Economy in 4 Numbers.” The conversation is remarkably upbeat; the numbers are showing an uncertain but strong national economy. I can best describe the tone of the conversation as light, whimsical almost. Just listen: [\(Play audio clip\)](#).<sup>2</sup>

Notice the dramatic shift in tone there. Notice, Barbaro’s laugh. I play these two excerpts for you – two episodes of the same show, just two days apart - not to pick on The Daily, one of my favorite podcasts, not to scold Michael Barbaro, a journalist I greatly admire, but as a way of highlighting the dissonance of this week. I play them, also, because I recognize something within myself while listening to them – a push to mourn, yes, but only for a moment, before getting back to business as usual, an impulse to compartmentalize and move on.

On the Friday when the footage of Nichols’ murder was released, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow said that this drive to move on, back to normal, is characteristic of white, progressive communities.

America has once again failed Black people who were pleading for help and demanding it. America should be ashamed. It abandoned the issue of police reform.

As the world reopened, elections approached and crime and inflation rose in tandem, interest in police reform and protecting Black lives from police violence melted away like ice cubes on a summer sidewalk.

And with it...Black people were taught that for some, interest in their safety had simply been a *dernier cri*, that allyship could be transitory and

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<sup>2</sup> The Daily, “The State of the US Economy in 4 Numbers.” Feb. 1, 2023.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/podcasts/the-daily/us-economy-inflation-layoffs-housing-market.html>

transactional, that some people entered the fight through a turnstile and that when their interest and energy waned, they exited the same way.<sup>3</sup>

These words find an echo in Matthew, chapter 5, when Jesus reminds people of faith that,

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 lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

How does salt lose its taste? How do we hide the light?

Notice how both salt and light do not point to themselves, but they illuminate; they enhance. You do not want salt to call attention to itself in your food. Rather, it should lift up the ingredients as a whole, like the salt in this bread we will soon share together.

And likewise, when we notice light, it is often when it hurts the eye, like when we stare up at the sun, as I did yesterday, trying to find a rogue balloon in the sky. Light should simply allow other things to be seen, making room for us all to go about our lives.

Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, whom we are studying in adult formation and education this season. In her book on the Sermon on the Mount, Prof. Levine writes,

Too much salt says, “Look at me,” and that approach, literally, is deadly to faith. Oversalted pastors in the pulpit give sermons that point to themselves rather than to the Scripture; oversalted disciples seek to be rewarded for good works on earth rather than works that give glory to God... The best salt – in food, in medicine, in dyes – is almost undetected. It does its work *not* by

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Blow, “Tyre Nichols’s Death Is America’s Shame.” *The New York Times*. January 27, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/27/opinion/tyre-nichols-video.html>

calling attention to itself but by brightening, making more alive, everything it permeates.<sup>4</sup>

This is why it is such a mistake to confuse the metaphor of light in the biblical text with our modern, colonial understanding of whiteness. We must remember that the Gospel was written by communities pushed to the margins, not those at the seat of power.

When we read the text through the lens of whiteness, we don't just miss the point. The text becomes an instrument of domination. Because Whiteness is a racial category invented to be set apart; whiteness is all about calling attention to itself rather than God. The GCPC staff heard that lesson forcefully when we attended an anti-racism conference this week at Montreat, called Fraught and Flummoxed.

But light and salt do not exist for themselves.

But here's my worry: Too often white dominant communities do exactly that; we call attention to ourselves. We see it in the momentary and passing grief that white dominant communities display when we hear about what happened to Tyre Nichols.

I don't think this is conscious. I don't think it is cynical.

But just a few days after the headlines, these communities, and the culture writ large, are tempted to get life going like it was before. When the news comes out, we like the right posts on social media, we share the right editorials, we hang our head low in grief, but as the days and weeks pass, as communities of color continue in the slow work of justice, white dominant communities start wondering when we can talk about something else. Can't we move on? Or we throw up our hands, and say the problems are too big, as if the very lives of our neighbors of color were not at stake.

Charles Blow said it best, in the editorial I just read, "As the world reopened...interest in police reform and protecting Black lives from police violence melted away like ice cubes on a summer sidewalk."

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<sup>4</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 48.

Is it going to happen again this time? Is it already happening? And when it does, what can we say, except that the grief of those of us in white skin sometimes seems to be more about our concern with being good white people than the real work of justice.

Like salt spoiling a dish, like light blinding you on the roadway, pointing to ourselves. (pause)

Communities of faith are called to something so much more than this. “Salt of the earth...Light of the world.”

Jesus calls his followers salt and light, not so that we will rush to easy solutions, or point to ourselves as the answers to the world’s problems, but so that we may always, constantly, and consistently point to and partner with, that Spirit of Love and Liberation that we believe exists and permeates this world.

And where we can, we are called to follow that Spirit into street protests, and city council meetings, and neighborhood association meetings, and school board meetings, and every other hall of power where inequity rather than liberation reigns.

And we are called also to follow that same Spirit, as it stirs in our heart, and calls us to reject society’s knee-jerk reaction back to the business as usual.

We are called to grieve, and to remember, and to repair, and to stand behind or alongside, and to use our voices, as people of faith, to disrupt this status quo. Especially, when it is not the convenient or popular thing to do.

For You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world. For the glory of the liberating God. Amen.

### **Invitation to the Table**

When you take the bread, notice the salt. It is subtle. You wouldn’t even realize it was there unless you were looking for it. But without it, the bread would be bland and lifeless. The ingredients would not come together in the same way.

And likewise, our savior invites us to this table, to support one another as the salt of the earth, not to draw attention to ourselves but to join the Spirit already at work in every corner of this creation.

This is a table of justice. It is a table of care-giving. It is a table of mutuality. This is the table of liberation. And it is ready, for you and for me, and for all those who trust in Christ, and those who want to trust in him. The feast is ready.