



**DNA, THE FABRIC OF LIFE
COMMUNITY-ENGAGED**

Matthew 5:13-16

October 3, 2010

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¹³"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Introduction

Today we take up the fourth strand in our DNA: *Community-Engaged*. And let me tell you at the outset how significant I think this strand is. If, as I mentioned several weeks ago, God-Centered is where we have the most room for growth, then Community-Engaged has the most far-reaching implications for our ministry as a church.

When Jesus first gathered followers to himself, he told them how they were to engage their community. He used two images, in fact. They were to engage their community *assault and as light*. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus said. "You are the light of the world."

But Jesus also knew his followers, whether in the first-century or the twenty-first century, would always be tempted to *disengage* from their community. So he warned them about failing to engage by losing their saltiness, on the one hand, or hiding their light, on the other.

Jesus' followers lose their saltiness when they lose their distinctiveness: their moral, spiritual and theological distinctiveness, that is. As we all know, salt stands out, whether on French fries or in a glass of water. So, too, should you, if you're a follower of Jesus. Yet the temptation, as the Apostle Paul would say, is to be "conformed to the pattern of this world." In short, to be worldly. An attempt to engage the world by living just like the world; perhaps becoming hipster Christians. When this happens, you may blend in beautifully with the world, but you'll lose your distinctiveness, your saltiness, as a follower of Jesus.

The equal and opposite temptation for believers is to hide our light. This is the temptation, not to *worldliness*, but to *withdrawal*—not to lose our saltiness through our worldliness, but to put a cover over our light *by withdrawing from the world*. This was the approach of Monasticism in the Middle Ages, and Fundamentalism in the modern world. In order to maintain faithfulness to Jesus, so the thinking goes, I must disengage from the world and all its unfaithfulness to Jesus.

Losing your saltiness, on the one hand, and hiding your light, on the other—Jesus criticized both mistakes. He warned against both temptations. And he called his followers to take a different course: to faithfully follow him into their communities, and there be both salt and light.

A follower of Jesus is, by definition, a person who is *Gospel-rooted*. And because your life has been firmly planted in the grace of God as you discovered it in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this very same God becomes central to your whole outlook on life; you become *God-centered*. And when you are rooted in grace and centered upon God, you begin to grow as a follower or disciple of Jesus; that is, you're *discipleship-focused*.

But, of course, the reality of the gospel and the centrality of God must extend themselves beyond yourself—and into the lives of those you live with: your family, your neighbors, your community. You can't help it; God and the Gospel simply overflow out of you into your neighbor's living room or the office boardroom. Therefore, as a faithful follower of Jesus you naturally become *community-engaged*.

But what does it mean to be community engaged? What does it mean to be salt and light where God has you? What does it mean to faithfully follow Jesus into your community? What does it mean for you as an individual or a family—and what does it mean for us as a church, as a faith community?

Maintain A Faithful Presence Within The Community

In order to engage our community as salt and light, here's the very first thing we must do: *we must maintain a faithful presence within the community*. This is where we need to start; this is where we must begin.

Of course, faithful followers of Jesus have always found it hard to maintain a faithful presence in the community. Because faithful followers of Jesus have always found themselves out of sync with their communities. Believers often feel like resident aliens, strangers, exiles even.

Perhaps you feel like an exile in your community. That wouldn't be either a surprise or a shock. But you need to hear what God says to exiles living in foreign lands: how you ought to think about your community, how you ought to engage with it.

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. . . . 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'" (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7).

You see, Jeremiah’s way—the way of the exile living in a foreign land—is not to withdraw from the community, but to faithfully engage with it.¹ Buy real-estate and have babies, God says. Grow a vegetable garden because you’re not planning on going anywhere soon. Get involved in the life of the community, even pray for it. *Seek its welfare*. This is God’s word to exiles on how to be community-engaged. And it’s God’s word to us, who seek to follow Jesus faithfully in our communities as salt and light, who seek to maintain a faithful presence in the community.

One of our own members, Roz Long, is maintaining a faithful presence in her community. She’s a resident of Elmhurst, and I recently saw a picture of her in the Elmhurst Independent newspaper. The article described an event she helped organize at the Glitch Gallery in Elmhurst. Listen to how the lead identified Roz: “Curating the exhibit is Roz Long of RGL Marketing for the Arts, an Elmhurst resident known for her work in the arts and charities.”

What struck me was how the reporter described Roz: *She’s known in her community as someone who seeks the welfare of the community*. She’s maintaining a faithful presence in the community; she’s being salt and light; she’s seeking the welfare of her city; she’s trying to faithfully follow Jesus in Elmhurst.

How about you? Could the same lead be written of you in your local newspaper? Are you known in your community for your faithful presence? Maybe not in your community, but how about in your neighborhood, on your street, in your apartment building, at your place of employment?

Are you maintaining a faithful presence where God has placed you: by pursuing the people in your community, identifying with them—their deepest needs and aspirations; offering your life—your time, treasure, and talents—to make their lives better; and loving them sacrificially, as you love Jesus Christ even more?²

How about us as a church? How have we done at maintaining a faithful presence within the community, within this community, our community, the village of Oak Park? How well has Calvary Memorial Church pursued the people of Oak Park, identified with their deepest needs and aspirations, offered our resources to improve their lives, loved them sacrificially in Jesus’ name and for Jesus’ sake? How have we done at engaging our community, not as a military operation, but as a service call; not as a combative adversary, but as a humble servant?

I think it’s fair to say that over the years Calvary has sought to be a *regional church in Oak Park*. That is to say, we’re a church located in the heart of Oak Park, but we draw people from many different communities. We’ve thought of ourselves as a church that transcends any particular community, and therefore draws from a variety of different communities. This has been a good thing in many ways; no doubt, this has contributed to our numerical growth over the years.

¹See Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 202), pp. 103-104.

² This paragraph, as well as this entire section of the sermon, is indebted to James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2010), especially pp. 238-254.

However, there is a downside with it. And it is this: in an effort to be accessible to other communities, we're not as fully *present* in this particular community of Oak Park as we could be.

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and you can tell that person's not fully there. He may be physically present, but you can tell his heart and mind are elsewhere. Do you think some of the people of Oak Park would say that about us as a church? Yes, they're there—right there, smack dab in the middle of Oak Park—but their heart and mind seem to be elsewhere, not fully in Oak Park or with the people of Oak Park.

Listen very carefully to what I'm about to say, because it's massive for our future ministry and direction as a church. I'm convinced that in order for us as a church to maintain a faithful presence in the community, we need to fundamentally rethink the way we've thought about our relationship to this community. And let me be specific: we need to think about ourselves, not as a regional church in Oak Park, but as *an Oak Park church with a regional impact*. Calvary needs to be more fully here—in this place and with this community. *In Oak Park—for Oak Park*.

Surely, friends, God knew what he was doing when he let our former church building on Madison Street burn to the ground. Surely God knew what he was doing by allowing us to move to a new facility right in the heart of Oak Park. Surely God knew what he was doing when several years ago he led the elders and leaders to commit to staying in Oak Park for the long-haul rather than move to a neighboring suburb. Surely God knows what he's doing by continuing to steadily increase the number of our congregants who live in Oak Park and have a heart for Oak Park, including calling a new Senior Pastor whose own heart burns for this community.

Surely God knows what he's doing in all of these things. Surely, then, I say, God wants us as a church to maintain a faithful presence in Oak Park. Not merely to be present, but to have a faithful presence.

Very briefly, then, let me offer you some specific challenges as to how you might help us maintain a faithful presence in Oak Park: (1) shop locally; (2) participate in the activities of the community; (3) serve and sacrifice for the community; (4) stay in Oak Park, despite the taxes; (5) move to Oak Park, despite the housing market; (6) for those who live in other communities, recognize the strategic importance of this particular community and commit to partnering with us to renew it with the gospel for the glory of God; (7) pray for Oak Park.

In Psalm 37, the Psalmist calls God's people to dwell where they're planted and to befriend faithfulness: "Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness" (37:3). This captures the heart of this first point: what it means to be salt and light by maintaining a faithful presence in the community.

Practice Christian Unity In Concrete Ways

Being salt and light, maintaining a faithful presence in a community, is obviously a big challenge. But it's an exciting challenge. In fact, so exciting is it that once you get your heart and mind engaged with the task, you'll find yourself asking: How do we not simply maintain, but *increase* our presence in the community?

Well, I'll can tell you how many Christians and many churches have answered this question over the past thirty years. They answer it this way: we increase our presence in the community by growing as a church: increasing our attendance, our budget, our size, the footprint of our building, and so on.

That's one way to answer the question. But there's another way to answer it. We can increase our presence in the community, by growing our own church, or by partnering with other like-minded churches: that is, by practicing Christian unity in concrete ways with other churches and other Christians. This is the second way in which we can engage with the community as salt and light.

Practicing Christian unity in concrete ways is the way of the future for evangelical Christianity, not least in North America. Practicing Christian unity means partnering with other Christians and other churches in order to do more together. This is not only the way of the future; it's also beautifully biblical and life-giving in so many ways.

First of all, it counteracts the marketplace impulse to compete with other churches rather than partner with them. In our pluralistic society, where no one church has a claim to the members of a community, what has happened is churches are thrust into competing for clientele.³ Because allegiance to a church is voluntary rather than imposed, churches need to work hard to gain and grow their clientele and increase their share of the religious market. So, just as Caribou competes with Starbucks for a larger share of consumers, so too churches can wind up competing with one another for larger shares of members! Practicing Christian unity in concrete ways, however, kills this impulse within us.

Second, practicing Christian unity in concrete ways honors the costly sacrifice Jesus made to secure the church's spiritual unity. Jesus did not die on the cross for two churches, much less twenty-two thousand. He died for *one* church—his church. Yes, it may have a thousand different expressions, but there's only *one* church. As the Apostle Paul reminds us: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). When we practice Christian unity in concrete ways with Rock Church in Austin or the Chinese Bible Church in Oak Park or Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, we honor as precious what the Lord has done to make us all one.

Third, practicing Christian unity in concrete ways testifies to the world that the gospel really works and Jesus is really real. This was Jesus' prayer for his followers: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). A fractured and fragmented church, a church in competition with itself, a church with as much partisan politics as Capital Hill, stands little chance of commending the gospel to the world. It also has little hope of persuading the watching world that this Jesus is actually real—and that his reality in our lives actually makes a real difference.

So we must prioritize practicing Christian unity in concrete ways with other Christians and other churches. This means doing very concrete things like, (1) sharing our resources

³See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp. 138: "The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities."

with other churches—our financial resources, our people resources; (2) providing prayer support to other churches and ministries; and (3) partnering with other churches to advance the gospel in our community.

Let me warn you, however, that there is a downside to practicing Christian unity. The downside with this approach is that we won't necessarily increase *our own presence as a church* in the community. When you seek to increase your faithful presence by partnering with other churches, you won't necessarily be able to put your logo on everything.

But here's the upside: we will be able to increase *the gospel's presence* in our community. And let me ask: Which is more important? More of Calvary Memorial Church, or more of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ?

Proclaim The Truth And Beauty And Goodness Of The Gospel

Now, as we maintain a faithful presence in the community, and as we increase our presence within the community, we will of course need to engage in *proclamation to the community*. We cannot truly engage our community without proclaiming the gospel. In fact, this is the very reason for our existence as followers of Jesus. God has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light so that we can proclaim his excellencies wherever we go (1 Pet. 2:9).

But how ought we to proclaim the excellencies of God? What ought it to sound like? What ought it to look like?

These questions bring us to our third and final point: in order to be engaged as salt and light in our community we must *proclaim the truth and beauty and goodness of the Gospel*.

Historically, evangelicals have been very good at proclaiming the truth of the gospel. There are both theological and cultural reasons for this. And, of course, a clear and unabashed proclamation of the truth is much needed in our day and age where talk of relative truth is fashionable and fuzzy thinking is the soup du jour.

But, listen to me, to proclaim the truth of the gospel is not to proclaim the *whole* of the gospel. For the gospel is not a set of ideas, or a system of doctrine, or philosophical outlook on life. And, when we share the gospel as though it were, we end up introducing people to a worldview, but not to a *Person*.

But the gospel is a *Person*—the Lord Jesus Christ, who is himself truth—yes, indeed—but also beauty and goodness as well. If we are to proclaim the full range of God's excellencies as they are found in his Son Jesus Christ, then we must proclaim not only the truth of the gospel, but the beauty of the gospel and the goodness of the gospel as well.

I suspect most of us understand what it means to proclaim the truth of the gospel. We declare the realities of what God has done in Christ Jesus to deliver humanity from sin and condemnation and death, and give the hope of eternal life. We lay out the truth of the Bible's testimony to who Jesus is and what he's done.

But how do you proclaim the beauty of the gospel, or the goodness of the gospel?⁴ We proclaim the beauty of the gospel by declaring what God has done in Christ Jesus *to heal our broken lives*. We proclaim the beauty of the gospel when we tell the story of what God has done in our hearts to redeem us from the enslaving power of sin. We proclaim the beauty of the gospel when we sing of God's amazing grace in saving a wretch like me. We proclaim the beauty of the gospel when we point a hurting world to the grace and mercy found in the cross of Christ.

We proclaim the goodness of the gospel by declaring what God has done in Christ Jesus *to restore our corrupt wills*. We proclaim the goodness of the gospel when we long for peace and justice and peace to reign in our midst as a people. We proclaim the goodness of the gospel when our life together transcends the racial and ethnic and socioeconomic divisions that make our world feel so often less than good. We proclaim the goodness of the gospel when we hold out the promise of all things being made new in and through Jesus Christ—and him alone.

Listen: what's desperately needed in our postmodern time—what's desperately needed in this postmodern town—is *a whole gospel proclamation*: a clear and compelling declaration of the truth and beauty and goodness of the gospel. For what we all need, every last one of us, is a transformative encounter with the Living Christ: his truth, his beauty, his goodness.

Conclusion

Community-Engaged is the fourth strand of our DNA. We've tried to capture what this means with three statements. Really, three practices, for you as an individual and for us as a church. We must maintain a faithful presence; we must practice Christian unity; we must proclaim the whole gospel: it's truth and beauty and goodness.

Engaging with community, being salt and light, faithfully following Jesus—this is countercultural stuff. It's countercultural even for the Christian subculture. For as John Stott has rightly said:

It comes more natural to us to shout the gospel at people from a distance than to involve ourselves deeply in their lives, to think ourselves into their culture and their problems, and to feel with them in their pains. Yet this implication of our Lord's example is inescapable.

Which, coming full circle, is why we must engage our community as those who are rooted in the gospel: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And which is why we must be God-centered: Father, Son, Holy Spirit central in our hearts and minds.

⁴ See N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), for further reflections on how Christianity answers the modern longing for justice/goodness and our delight in beauty.

Only by staying rooted in the gospel and centered upon God will you be able to say to your community, and us as a church to the community of Oak Park:

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake . . . But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us (2 Corinthians 4:5, 7).

Only in this way will we be truly community-engaged—for the good of this community and to the glory of God!

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