

“Gooooooal: For Moderately Gifted People”

Matthew 5:13-16

(Jesus likens our importance to salt and light.)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church

How many of you have watched some of the World Cup matches the past few weeks? You all know, I assume, that Landon Donovan, who has now made the most goals for the U.S. in the history of the World Cup is from Redlands? He played at REV high school. I understand that some members of some of your families have played with him, at least pick-up games. Aren't goalkeeper Tim Howard, Jozy Altador and the whole team, even though they are now out of the tournament, all spectacular players?

Maybe you're a Wimbledon fan. Think of John Isner, playing the longest tennis game in history—11 hours! Aren't Serena and Venus fantastic, and Nadal and Federer amazing athletes?

The U.S. Open Golf tournament is now over, but sure lots of great talent there. And, what about Kobe Bryant and Pau Gasol and of course Le Bron James

And, baseball—isn't this crazy to have 4 recent “perfect games” by pitchers? 20 or so in baseball history and 4 within a year.

Whew, what superb athletes we are able to watch in so many sports, from our own living rooms!

All this superbness on TV screens around the world got me to recall a powerful meditation that the Dean of the seminary where I taught gave as the opening prayer for a faculty meeting one time. This dean, Kendall McCabe, loved literature. This particular faculty meeting the Dean started with a reading from Kurt Vonnegut, from his book, *Bluebeard*.

“... think ... back to the time when people had to live in small groups of relatives—maybe fifty or a hundred people at the most. And evolution or God or whatever arranged things genetically, to keep the little families going, to cheer them up, so that they could all have somebody to tell stories around the campfire at night, and somebody else to paint pictures on the walls of the caves, and somebody else who wasn't afraid of anything and so on. ...of course a scheme like that doesn't make sense anymore, because simply moderate giftedness has been made worthless by the printing press and radio and television and satellites and all that. A moderately gifted person who would have been a community treasure a thousand years ago has to give up, has to go into some other line of work, since modern communications put him or her into daily competition with nothing but world's champions. . . The entire planet can get along nicely now with maybe a dozen champion performers in each area of human giftedness. A moderately gifted person has to keep his or her gifts all bottled up, until, in a manner of speaking, he or she gets (excuse me) drunk at a wedding and tap-dances on the coffee table. . .” I was impressed with our dean, for starting a faculty meeting with this meditation. I honestly don't think he was insulting us, expecting only moderate giftedness from us. I think he was sharing, humbly, honestly, the joy of our doing what we are called to do, and simply doing the best we could at it.

My preaching professor, when I took preaching as a seminary student in 1971, taught me 3 things that I recall. One was that people will consider you a *great preacher* if you have 12 good sermons a year.ⁱⁱ What a relief for those of us who preach 40 or so times a year! Only 12 out of a year of Sundays. That's just about the batting average of a moderately good professional baseball player.

I think that the excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut which the Dean used as a meditation for us faculty members mirrors for us a good deal of the meaning of the passage we heard from the Gospel of Matthew.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" "You are the light of the world. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Salt was a necessity in biblical times. It was naturally associated with many foods and was usually gathered from the area of the Dead Sea. I remember being impressed as a child in Sunday School when I learned about the high salt content of the Dead Sea. The way the curriculum explained the situation, a person could float easily in that sea; a picture even showed us a man sitting up in the water, buoyed up by all that salt.

Jesus described his followers as "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). Was he referring to the life-giving qualities of salt? Was he saying that they kept the world from being tasteless? Was he saying that they were essential, as salt is? In the Gospel of Mark (9:50) Jesus uses the term *salt* to refer to a quality of peacefulness which the disciples had within themselves.

You theologians, which means each of you, conjecture what Jesus meant when he told his disciples that they were the salt of the earth.

I know we have a couple chemists in our congregation. I need to check this out with you. I understand that salt, pure sodium chloride, does not deteriorate--it cannot "lose" its flavor. But it can be mixed with something else. Maybe Jesus meant it was impossible for his disciples to lose their character, but that they could get mixed up... Or more likely, as much as Jesus knew about God, he didn't know what chemists know today about the properties of salt.

Jesus used the metaphor "salt," applying it to his disciples, probably to convince them, and all who seek to follow God, that they/we are essential for the earth. Jesus' choice of the metaphor "light" was especially interesting for "light" had usually been a metaphor that referred to God. "Light of the world" was a phrase used by many rabbis to name God, Israel, or the Torah (the Law). It seems Jesus was suggesting: "You are the 'divine' within the world."

There's a difference here in the three Gospels. Matthew reads, "You are the light of the world." Mark talks about not putting a lamp under a bushel. In John, Jesus is seen as saying of himself, "I am the light of the world."

We get the metaphor: If the light, our light, is hidden, it cannot be seen. Light is not meant to be hidden, but to be placed up, where it can do what it was meant to do--illuminate. That's the whole purpose of light. How about this summary? God's radiance needs to shine, and we disciples have something to do with helping to make that happen. Disciples should use our God-given gifts. We should BE SALTY and BE LIGHT-BEARING.

Notice what is not recorded that Jesus said: He did not say, “You are the cilantro of the earth.” Jesus evidently did not say, “You are the hot sauce of the earth.” Neither did Jesus say, “You are incredible laser beams.” (Well, I admit that lasers didn’t exist then.)

Jesus’ metaphors of encouragement to his disciples mirror what Kurt Vonnegut tried to communicate when he talked of “Moderately gifted people.” They were salt, needed, essential, but they did not need to be exotic, gourmet, or even saucy.

I have a long time appreciation of moving van workers. At least in my experience, they labor and sweat hard all day as they load the moving van. Their job requires people skills (with families who are exhausted), physical strength, and mental agility to figure out how to get furniture through small places, unmarred, and then shaped into a rectangular stack in the truck. I vividly recall that when I complimented the moving van workers who brought our stuff to California from Ohio, one of the men responded, “We’re professionals.”

Just recently I was impressed with two waitresses as they served breakfast to a growing number of customers. I asked my waitress whether there were just two of them, and she replied that one other waitress had called in sick, but she added, “We can do it!”

The movers and the waitresses were salty; they were light-bearing. They were moderately gifted.

Does watching Kobe Bryant, Venus and Serena Williams, Landon Donovan, or brilliant entertainers, politicians, and medical experts . . . prompt us who have less wattage in those domains to let our lights shine, too? Or, does seeing them be so good inhibit us from making any attempt?

For some of us, a famous light-bearer or salty performer may not inhibit us as much as a big sister or little brother who is so much better than we are at something. After my mother sewed 9 hours a day for decades, beautiful pieces of clothing, some of which I still wear, I myself chose only to sewing Halloween costumes and to mend teddy bears. I chose the art of cooking instead. Because of my mother, I know what really good sewing is, so I knew that sewing was not my gift.

Meditating on the idea of being “moderately gifted” led me to wonder about those of us who are parents. Is it fine to be “moderately gifted parents”? My wondering went even further, as I began to wonder if there is any parent who is better than “moderately gifted.” What a relief, to feel I’m okay, even light-bearing and salty, if I’m moderately good at parenting, if my love comes through my mistakes.

Maybe the same ratio of wise responses to another generation--whether that be our parents or our children--as 12 good sermons a year is for a preacher--would make us remembered as great parents, or great children.

Our son played soccer from age 4 on to his senior year in high school. He was on the upper end of moderately gifted. Would he go out for that sport in college? No. But, maybe in intramurals, he said. Then, not long after he arrived at college he informed us that he just agreed to be on their diving team. Diving team? He had gone to the pool for recreation and asked if it were alright to dive off the board. The lifeguard asked him if he had ever thought of being on the diving team. Obviously, for the lifeguard to suggest this to someone who had never dived competitively in his life, it seemed that the college team must be on the low-end of moderately gifted. But, more fascinating, from my motherly perspective was “why” did he agree to do something he did not really know how to do?

He explained that diving was something he wanted to learn about. Besides being puzzled, I was grateful for his lack of a need to be “exceptionally good” at something just to do it.

I hope that we in this congregation encourage light-bearers who are moderately gifted singers to sing in our choir, moderately gifted cooks to cook on Wednesdays, and moderately gifted actors to perform in the Follies. (Remember try outs are today.) I know from personal experience Jennifer Schmidt allows moderately gifted dancers to join in our liturgical dance group!

One time I interviewed 10 fifteen year old girls to research how teen-aged girls feel about themselves, how they make decisions, and what influences them. In the group were five European and five African American girls; there was a United Methodist, an agnostic, two Baptists, two Roman Catholics, one Seventh Day Adventist, and two who were Jewish. From this tiny sample, what emerged as a common denominator that helped the girls to thrive was to have a PLACE, or places to belong, places where they could be moderately gifted at something. In some instances this “place” was sports, arts, music or academics at school. In most instances, too, a “place to belong” was also involvement and responsibility in a congregation. Being needed at their church or synagogue was important for most of the girls.

We may know the name of recent valedictorians, but we usually do not know the name of the one who is 126th in their graduating class. Yet that one may be the waitress who radiates light early in the morning and declares, “We can do it.” That one may be a mover who declares, “We’re professional.” Or, that one may be the lifeguard who says, “Join the team; I’ll teach you how to dive.”

Now, I realize that if we want our church to be vibrant, we expect others to mention to their friends and neighbors--“We have a great church, come join me!” We don’t aspire to say to our friends, “Wow, come to our church, we have a lot of moderately gifted people--you’d enjoy it there.” But, inwardly, we can know that this is a haven, a place where there are some very gifted people in many arenas, but where saltiness and light-hearted divine joy, beauty and adventure in everyone are celebrated.

“Moderately gifted” does not mean “mediocre,” inferior, or not good-enough. It means the ability as Kurt Vonnegut wrote and the Dean shared with us faculty, “to keep the little families going, to cheer them up, so that they could all have somebody to tell stories around the campfire, somebody else to paint pictures, and somebody else who wasn’t afraid of anything.”

Some announcers yell, “Goooooooooal” when a soccer goal is made by one of the fantastic soccer players of the world. What is the Goooooooooal for Moderately Gifted People? I think the answer is what Jesus told his followers: be salty, be light-bearing. We can go about humbly, honestly, doing what we are *inspired* to do, enjoying that, and doing the best we can at it, at the same time enjoying others who are likewise sharing their lights and being salty in their way.

ⁱ J. Talley in *To Keep the Little Families Going*, p. 154-155. Excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 1987.

ⁱⁱ The other two things this professor taught us, I frankly ignore. One was that every sermon must begin with law, then move to grace, and end in law again. The other thing I learned and ignored was that women must leave the room if men are going to use bad words. I learned that because I was the only woman in the class and when one man used a bad word, the professor made me leave and talked to the rest, saying they couldn’t use fowl language in front of a “lady.”