

I'm That Kind of Christian  
March 2, 2014  
Matthew 5:13-16

This morning our Scripture passage is from Matthew's Gospel. It comes from the Sermon on the Mount, and suggests how it is that we are to live as people of faith. Jesus says:

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. 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.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Loving One, help us to live well as your salt and light all along the journey of life. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Over the last few years, I have heard one man preach more than any other. Ron Patterson, Senior Minister of Naples United Church of Christ, has a saying that I have come to appreciate. While he uses many variations, it usually sounds something like this: "You may be the only Jesus some people ever see."

Let me repeat that before we begin unpacking what it means . . . "You may be the only Jesus some people ever see." At its core, it suggests that we are called to live out our faith – to be salty disciples, to shine whatever light we may have wherever we may go.

For those who are not following the Way of Jesus, the number one way they form opinions about Christianity is by observing people they think are Christians. And, let me tell you, the opinions they form matter. It is quite possible that by observing you someone will assume that all Christians are just like you.

The first class I led after moving to Florida was on this very topic. It was based on a book titled *unChristian*, which has a long but important subtitle: "What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . And Why it Matters."<sup>1</sup> It explores research done by the Barna Group on what young outsiders think about Christianity. These young people were aged 16 to 29 and represent a group that was then some 24 million strong who were outside the Christian faith.

The most common favorable impression of Christianity is one that makes us taste bland or salt-free: more than 4 out of 5 young outsiders think "Christianity teaches the same basic idea as other religions."<sup>2</sup>

Every other descriptor that young outsiders favored is negative. As a whole these labels suggest that Christians don't act in very Christ-like ways; in fact, they seem to offer proof that we deserve the *unChristian* label.

The top six ways this group described Christians are: hypocritical, judgmental, sheltered, too focused making converts, anti-homosexual, and too political.<sup>34</sup>

If I am honest with you, the *unChristian* book didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. It did, however, provide significant research to confirm what I had been hearing for all of my adult life from those my age and younger.

Christianity hasn't done so well in this country in recent years.

We have an image issue. The Jesus people see in us isn't one they find attractive.

We have a numbers issue. The percentage of people who affiliate with Christianity is in decline. In our own Protestant world, the once unthinkable is now reality: we have lost our status as this country's majority religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why it Matters* (Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29-30.

<sup>4</sup> For more on what these authors have written about young Christians, see especially their individual works: Gabe Lyons. *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America* (Doubleday, 2010) and David Kinnaman. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . And Rethinking Faith* (Baker Books, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Dan Merica. "Survey: Protestants are no Longer Majority in U.S."

<<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/09/survey-protestants-are-no-longer-majority-in-u-s/>>

Put differently, there are more people than ever outside of the Christian faith living in our country and even in our neighborhoods. These people are watching you and they are watching me. While they may be filtering what they see through any number of lenses, I want to share three that you have certainly encountered.

First, we have Sheila-ism. The term was coined by the well-known American sociologist Robert Bellah back in the 1980s<sup>6</sup>. He explains:

Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as "Sheilism." This suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, one for each of us. "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilism. Just my own little voice." Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining what she calls "my own Sheilism," she said: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other."<sup>7</sup>

Second, we have the "nones" – those who are religiously non-affiliated. These are folks who simply have decided none of the existing groups work for them. The group has been around for years, but most people didn't pay attention until they started getting labeled as our country's fastest growing religion.

- Over the last 30 years, they have grown from being around 1 out of every 15 adults to now being close to 1 in 5.<sup>8</sup>
- Among the youngest adults, the growth is even more rapid. For those aged 18-24, the percentage who are religiously non-affiliated has risen from just under 10% to over 30% in about 20 years.<sup>9</sup>

Third, there is a group known as the spiritual but not religious (SBNR). These are the people who are fed up with even the idea of organized religion, yet engage in intentional spiritual practices that often share a

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<sup>6</sup> Originally coined in *Habits of the Heart* (1985).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bellah. "Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion." <[http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm)>

<sup>8</sup> Greg Smith. "Rise of the Nones." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/09/07/rise-of-the-nones/>>

<sup>9</sup> Greg Smith. "Reality Check: Religious Non-Affiliation." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2014/02/18/reality-check-religious-non-affiliation/>>

lot in common with those who are religious – just without any attachment to an institutional or organizational structure.

While this group is a bit harder to explain, the Urban Dictionary offers this helpful definition:

spiritual but not religious = “smart enough not to be duped by the politics of religion, but enlightened enough not to be compartmentalized by the existentialism of atheism.”<sup>10</sup>

It is time for us to reconsider our assumptions about the makeup of our world, especially those people that we encounter as we journey through life. Each and every week, your life crosses the path of many people for whom you become the only Jesus they ever see.

Where will life take you in the week ahead? In the months ahead? How many people will you encounter that see Christianity through their own form of Sheila-ism or as a none or as one who is spiritual but not religious?

I am not an expert on either salt or light. I do, however, know that a little of either can go a very long way.

Years ago I was introduced to a simple phrase that has never become a regular part of my vocabulary, yet seems to fit well here: “God sighting.” When I crowd sourced my attempt at defining the term, a youth minister with whom I previously served suggested:

A God sighting to me evokes memories of "seeing" (or experiencing) God as a direct result of witnessing someone else's actions.<sup>11</sup>

Who are you?

You are the only Jesus some people will ever see.

What might you become?

As people encounter Jesus through you, you become a God sighting.

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<sup>10</sup> Urban Dictionary. “Spiritual but not Religious.”

<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=spiritual%20but%20not%20religious>>

<sup>11</sup> Harold Huddleston. Reply to a post on my Facebook page, February 27, 2014.

How does this happen?

Our Scripture reading explains. The Message, a contemporary paraphrase, has Jesus put it this way:

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.

If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.

If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine!

Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.<sup>12</sup>

This message leaves me with only one question:  
will you strive to be that kind of Christian?

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:13-16