

"Shine Out"**Matthew 5: 13-16****lifepath church****August 23, 2009**

When Jesus climbed a low hill above the Sea of Galilee and sat down to teach his followers, he shared with them what it meant to be God's people in the world. He shared with them and all who call themselves by his name what it means to be truly human. The way of life he shared in chapters five, six, and seven of the Gospel of Matthew were, and continue to be, very different from the way the rest of the world lives. And, toward the beginning of this Sermon on the Mount he said something very significant. For those of you who have heard these verses a hundred times, I'm going to challenge you to listen as if you were hearing them for the very first time. He is defining who we, his people, his church are supposed to be. Listen now to Jesus. Listen to the Word of God. (Read Matthew 5: 13-16)

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Without going into all the possible nuances of those two images, it is easy to see the main point he was making: "You are to be different in order to make a difference." Salt changes food. It brings out the flavor. It prevents it from spoiling and going bad. And light. Light changes, well, everything. It brings knowledge and truth. It dispels illusions and misconceptions. Light brings hope and joy. By saying you are to be salt and light, Jesus was saying, "If you want to be my people you realize that you exist not just for yourselves. I have a calling, a mission for you, my church. You are to be a part of me changing the world."

Which was not really a new message. When God first called for Abraham way back in the book of Genesis he offered him this relationship. I will bless your family be your God he but the purpose for that is that "all the families on earth will

be blessed through you" (Genesis 12: 3). In other words Abraham and his family would be a part of God reclaiming the whole world and call it back into relationship with him. Hundreds of years later when Abraham's family had become the nation of Israel and God sent Moses to give them the Law, he was offering them a way of being different, not just for their own sakes but so others would see the relationship they had with the true God and want to be changed. As God says through the prophet, "Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD rises and appears over you. All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see your radiance" (Isaiah 60: 2-3). You see? The people of God were always to be salt and light, different in order to make a difference.

Unfortunately the nation of Israel didn't want to be different. They wanted to be like everyone else. God began to talk about his people needing to be renewed from the Inside out. "The day is coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with the ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the LORD. "But this is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31: 31-33). And so God did renew his covenant relationship. He sent his Son Jesus. Jesus came to fulfill all the promises made way back to Abraham that his family would bless the entire world. Jesus came to renew the broken covenant by writing God's word on the human heart. And he succeeded. In his death the covenant was renewed by offering forgiveness. And in the power of his resurrection the Holy Spirit was given so that people would have their hearts changed. And in Jesus the people of God blossomed and grew, no longer made up of any one nation but one from all the families of the earth. It was now the church. But the mission given to the people of God was the same as it had ever been. Jesus makes that clear. Be the salt of the

earth. Be the light of the world. Be different in order to make a difference. "Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5: 16).

And down through its history, when the Church shined forth the love of God, it grew and flourished and blossomed. And when it forgot its calling, it did not. The historians say that one of the reasons the church grew so fast over the first few centuries of its existence is because the love they offered was just so different from anything the ancient people had seen. All of a sudden here were these people who reached out and loved and took care of people who were not related to them, people even of their tribe or ethnic group. Who are these people and why do they do what they do? As the Christians gained more influence over the society many of the barbarities of the Roman Empire were ended. The bloody gladiatorial games were closed. The practice of killing of unwanted newborn children was stopped. Down through the next two thousand years the church founded orphanages and hospitals. It battled to end slavery and took care of those others ignored or considered worthless. Now, there have been significant failures along the way, where the church forgot its calling. But think about it: Western civilization, the place where the church has had the most influence, at least up until the 20th century, to this day places a value on the dignity of the individual that no other civilization does. To an enormous degree that is because the Church has showed forth that each individual was precious in the eyes of God. You, no matter what your status in society, because there is a God who made you and died for you and is calling to you right now saying, "Be in relationship with me. You are loved. Come and know me."

But what about today? A new century, a new millennium has dawned. The church with its good news about God seems to have less and less of an impact on our society. Why is that? Well, how is the church viewed by society? You've seen the bumper sticker which reads, "God save me from your followers"? Increasingly the church is seen as a bunch of people who tell everyone else what they are doing

wrong but really but really isn't any different from anyone else. Are we really being salt and light? Different to make a difference? Increasingly the world cannot see that we have anything to offer. And as society gets rougher and less influenced by the gospel many churches have responded by retreating into themselves. Let's build beautiful buildings and spacious facilities and invite others inside them. We say, "Come to our programs. Participate in our worship services. Support our building programs." And so is it any mystery why the world thinks the church has little to offer. To them it often looks like the we believe they are there to serve us. No wonder most churches in the United States are not growing. Have we forgotten the words of Jesus? You are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. You are to be different to make a difference. Non-believers should look at your lives and be so amazed by the love you show that they see Me in you and are drawn to Me through you and give praise to their Father in Heaven.

Lifepath church is now a year and four months old. Very early into it, I think it was in May of last year, we began to get a vision from God as to what he was calling us to do. Surprise, surprise it wasn't that different from what God has been doing through his people since the time of Abraham. Be different in order to make a difference. We started calling it the Inside-Out Vision, meaning God was changing us on the inside so that we could make a difference on the outside. We talked about it as elders and shared with the congregation that God was calling us to several things: One, equip our members to realize the gifts God has in them and share those gifts, not just with the church, but with the community. Two, listen to the community and partner with the community to address some of the community's needs. Three, when it came time to build a facility build it to serve the community's needs and not just the needs of the congregation. People in the community would be served in the building all week long. And four, we would not be afraid to engage the world where it's hurting. That was the vision. If a congregation was really willing to show that the people of God are here to serve the community, rather than expecting the community

to serve them, then the love of Jesus Christ can be made obvious even to a cynical and unbelieving world. Doors would be opened to share with them who our Heavenly Father is. "Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."

This Inside Out vision has been on our website for a year now. It's still there. And we've reminded ourselves of this vision from time to time but we haven't done much with it. Honestly we weren't sure how. How do we figure out the needs of the community? How do we go about serving and loving them? What does it even mean to not be afraid of the pain of the world? How do we do that? More than once this last year I've prayed, "Ok, God. You've given us this vision. I'm excited about it. But I don't know how to lead them forward. I need some help." God is good. He answers prayer! Back in April of this year I reconnected with an old friend. Susan Nichols was the director of Bear Creek Assistance Ministries from the years 1998 to about 2002. I had known her as someone who knew the community, was experienced in community development, and most importantly, I knew she was in love with Jesus Christ. She had been a part of the pastors' prayer group and we had gotten to know each other and trust each other during that time. But I hadn't seen her in a while. She had stopped being the director at BCAM in order to raise her two little ones. But in April there she was, back up at the pastors' prayer group. So I said, "Susan! We've got this vision to be and Inside Out church and do some things in the community but we don't really know how to take the first steps. Would you look at the vision on the church website and give us some advice on how to go about it?" She did and said, "I'm so excited about this vision. I believe God is calling me to be a part of it." Yay God! I introduced her to the church staff and to the elders. They got to know her and through discussion and prayer we agreed that God was calling her and her family to be a part of lifepath and work together on the vision God has for us. So all this summer we have been working and learning and praying and dreaming.

First of all we needed to begin to know the community better. Were there really any needs to be addressed? We all know that when we think of community needs, poverty, stuff like that where do we usually think of? The inner city. Surely, out here in the suburbs everything is great and the community is fine, right? Our area Cy-Fair turns out to be a very interesting place. The entirety of it, with the exception of Jersey Village, is unincorporated. Do you know how many people live in the Cy-Fair School district? Over 730,000 people. Nearly three quarters of a million. If Cy-Fair were incorporated into one city it would be the 17th largest city in the country. It's bigger than Fort Worth and growing fast. The school district has over 100,000 students and has built 24 new campuses in the last five years. They project that they will add another 24,000 students over the next five years. But surely all these students are comfortable middle class people? All the poverty is inside the loop in the inner city, right? Well, it turns out Houston is changing. Wealthy people are moving inside the loop and building lofts and renewing the downtown. And when that happens, what happens to the property values of land? Have you tried to buy property inside the loop lately? And when the property values go up, what happens to those with lower incomes? They get pushed out. And where are they going? Well, the price to live is cheaper out here. We have good schools. And there is public transportation from here to the center of town. So now there are pockets of lower income people all over Cy-Fair. Here's a startling little number: 37% of the children in the district are on free or reduced lunch programs. Title one schools dot the district. What's a title one school? One where at least 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is tied to federal poverty guidelines. Here's another little eye opener: there are 1200 homeless kids in our schools. We don't have to go to the inner city to be a blessing. Nothing should make that more clear than the fact that the school where we worship each week, Labay Middle School, is a title one school.

The elders authorized Susan to begin networking with community leaders to listen and ask questions on our behalf. As she has met with them the enthusiasm and open doors have almost scary. She met with one of the district officials and she was so excited that she actually called her boss into the meeting. When was the last time someone met with you in your office and you were so excited that you called your boss into the meeting? I asked Susan, why were they so excited? "Elliott," she replied, "I just told them I was with a church that was serious about serving the needs of the community and I wanted to listen to them. That got them really excited because they are so overwhelmed by the needs." Wow. We're talking about public school officials wanting involvement from the church.

What is God calling us to do? It would be really easy to leap into something and start working away. But we're talking about a call from God here. He has something he wants for us to do and we need to make sure it's what he wants. Someone once wrote that a call is where your great gladness meets the world's great need. It's not about me or Susan or even the elders picking something for us to do. It's about figuring out where the gifts of this congregation are and then listening to the community to see where it all matches up. What is God's plan? So the elders have decided that we will go through a time of exploration together. We'll start in September and hopefully be done in early spring. By the early spring we want to have accomplished the following four things: First, we'll know specifically which need in the community God is calling us to address. And this will come through continuing to listen to the community, and to listen to the congregation and through lots of prayer. Secondly, we will continue to build the network of relationships with others in the community who are interested in serving. We've got several concrete steps to do that. Thirdly, we are going to begin serving in the community now. It's important for us to begin to get our feet wet. There are two ministries that we've talked to and invited us to help them out over this six month period. Firstly, there is Cypress Assistance Ministries, which is on Huffmeister. They have lots of different things that

they do. It has a food pantry and a thrift shop. They organize volunteers to help needy seniors. (We've already done a few jobs for them. Some of our members built some front porch stairs for a cancer patient who was having trouble getting in and out of her trailer home.) They teach English as a second language and provide tutors for folks getting their GED. They offer tutors for folks writing resumes and interviewing skills. They do food drives, school supply drives (which were doing right now) and toy drives at Christmas. The point is that there are lots of little jobs for volunteers of widely differing skills. The other ministry we're going to be involved in is new and exciting. Three churches – Copperfield Church and Calvary Church and lifepath have been invited by one of our local schools – Hairgrove Elementary to provide mentors for some of the kids. We're still exploring together all the things we might do for these children together, but there is going to be an opportunity for us to reach out to a public school and change the lives of some kids.

Understand that the point in volunteering at Cypress Assistance Ministries and Hairgrove Elementary is not that we at lifepath or going to create our own ministry that looks exactly like those ministries. It's to give us some experience and some confidence and allow God to begin to get us used to serving our community. Also, starting later in September Susan is also going to begin teaching a class called the Kingdom Agenda, which will ask the questions like, How did Jesus do ministry? How would he do it today? Are there principles in the Bible that can show us how to be an Inside-Out church? As we learn, and try new things, God is going to give us a clear idea of how he wants to use us.

The fourth and last goal of this six month exploratory period is that by the early spring we will have a definite plan for constructing a facility which is going to serve God's vision. We'll know what this facility is supposed to look like, what ministries it's going to contain, where it needs to be, given who we are and who we're called to serve. And we'll have a business plan for moving forward with it.

Those of you on the set-up and tear down crews, can I get an amen to moving forward with a building?

What can you be doing to participate in this? Over the next few weeks, we're going to tell you. We'll start to make the volunteer opportunities very clear. We'll let you know when the Kingdom Agenda class is going to take place. We'll get you all the details you could dream of. The important thing you can do beginning right now is pray. We've got a plan and we've got a timetable. Between September and January or February lots of things are going to happen and things will be increasingly clear. But it's all about God and what he wants to do. So we need to ramp up our praying. We're going to start incorporating prayer for the different parts of the plan into our Sunday morning worship. At each service one of our elders or deacons is going to lead us in prayer for God's vision.

And God is going to answer those prayers. You see, here's the deal. You can make plans and pray for God to bless them. Maybe he will and maybe he won't. But if you tap into God's plan and ask him to include you on what he's doing, he's always going to answer that prayer. What God wants to do is what he has wanted to do since he first called to Abraham and spoke to Moses. It is what God was doing through his Son Jesus and down through two millennia of church history. God wants to use his people to reach this skeptical world that needs him so much. God is looking for people who are willing become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He is looking for a people that he can make different in order to make a difference – to shine forth with a love so clear and so strong that sad and broken see for the first time that they have a Heavenly Father who cares for them and they turn their lives over to him give him praise.

Amen