



IN THE COMMUNITY

The Church on Monday Morning

Pastor Derek Sanford

9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church June 28-29, 2007

Well this is the final week in our 4 week series called "The Church on Monday." I hope you have benefited by the teaching this past month. In week 1 we talked through being the church in our neighborhoods and what it looks like to truly be a neighbor to those around us. We talked about the "love them as yourself" principle and the "overflowing life" principle. We asked the question, "Why do I live near the people that I live?" God has a plan for you in your neighborhood.

In week 2 Pastor Larry talked about the church on Monday in our homes. He challenged us from Deuteronomy chapter 6 that God's design for the home from the beginning was this little church. And he suggested that God's desire is to charge parents to develop a red-hot, life-encompassing love for Him and then allow that passion to overflow into the lives of their children through example and spiritual conversations in the home. Last week Pastor Mike challenged us to be the church at work; and to re-envision our role at work to be a calling from God and to live distinctively as a Christian in our workplace in everything that we endeavor to do there. And so over the last three weeks we've asked could God be up to something in placing me in the strategic locations that he has me? 1) Why am I in my neighborhood? 2) Why am I in my family? 3) Why am I in my job? And this morning we're going to pull the lens back a bit and ask the question, "why am I in Erie right now?" And I want to ask that question both individually and corporately.

For one reason or another – you are here in Erie, Pennsylvania for this season of your life. I don't know exactly why, but I guarantee it is not an accident. I don't believe the sheer spiritual need in the Erie Area has ever been bigger than it is right now. If there were one word to describe Erie I would choose the word "established." So many people here are so established vocationally, socially, relationally, religiously and still spiritually lost. Many of them have tasted religion at some time in their past, but it was a stale taste, a bad experience, a mistake that they're not going to be quick to repeat. Confusion, emptiness, distraction, misplaced priorities. We did a study a few years ago and came to realize that 55 thousand people within a 10 mile radius of here do not have any church affiliation, not a part of a community of faith, not a part of a place where they can find ultimate purpose and meaning.

This is where we live. This is the place that God has given us. Other people have other days and other places. This is our day, and this is our place. And this is the community that God has called us to influence. We have long said that of the five purposes of the church that we have adopted here, there is only one that we won't be able to do in heaven. We will be able to worship, we'll be able to fellowship, we'll be able to serve, and we'll be able to learn and grow for all of eternity in heaven. The one thing that we won't be able to do is to reach out to those who don't know God. That opportunity for reaching out is reserved for this lifetime and this lifetime only. So what does it look like?

Turn to Matthew 5. Jesus is in the midst of delivering the most famous sermon of all time, The Sermon on the Mount, and he lists off a series of characteristics for his followers that are so counter-cultural that it must have been shocking to his listeners. He says you can be happy when your sad (*blessed are the poor in spirit*), you can be happy when you cry (*blessed are those who mourn*), you can be happy when you are not chasing after greatness in the world's eyes (*blessed are the meek*), you can even be happy when people hate you, (*"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven..."*). And then after these really amazing statements, he says these words:

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:13-16

Salt of the Earth

He's not giving a command here. He doesn't say, try to be salty, or work hard to get saltier. He's making an observation: You're the salt of the earth. And to understand what Jesus meant by this, you have to understand that salt played a much more central role in Jesus' world than it does in ours. Does anyone know what the number one use of salt in the United States today is? More than 51% of all salt that is produced here is used to de-ice roads. That was not true for Jesus. When He came to earth, He did not come to a place where roads were covered by ice and snow, because He knew that it was not God's will that people should live in such places. Those are stupid places to live!

In the ancient world, it was a different story. People discovered that there was something about salt that is a preservative. People discovered that there is something about salt that arrests decay and corruption, and so it was almost like magic. They found that if they used salt, they could preserve food for times of famine, so that it literally contributed to an outcome of life or death. They discovered that it was a purifying agent, because it destroys bacteria. They discovered that it brings delight to people who are eating, because there are special taste buds on your tongue that are designed to respond to salt.

There was actually a book on the New York Times bestseller list called *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky. He describes the value of salt in the ancient world. Salt was highly prized. Most of the ancient cities in Italy, including Rome, were founded on salt works. Romans used salt to pay soldiers. The Latin word for salt is the word "sal." That's where the word "salary" comes from, because salt was used to pay people. That's where we get the expression, "he is worth his salt." In the ancient world, salt was one of the most common factors that provoked and financed wars. People went to war over salt.

You can't understand what Jesus is saying unless you understand that in the ancient world salt was currency. They went to war over it. Empires were built around it. And Jesus, when He's talking to an undistinguished group—kind of a motley crew on a hillside in Galilee that day—says that God's plan to protect the world from decay and corruption, to purify it and bring whatever flavor and zest it's going to have, is you. You are the salt of the earth. You. That's what Jesus says. You are the salt of the earth.

One of the amazing things to me is the early church—the salt of the earth. This motley crew of very imperfect people gets together in small bands around Jerusalem under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. And the people who were opposed to the Christian church thought they would stop it by persecuting it. They sent Christians to prisons. Guess what happened? The prisons started to get salty. They said we'll stop the church by kicking all the Christians out of Jerusalem. The believers get kicked out of Jerusalem and guess what happens. The whole region, starting in Asia Minor, starts to get salty. The idea that you could stop the early church by spreading Christians around...that was just getting the salt out of the shaker!

You are the salt of the earth. Now that's the stuff bumper stickers are made of. But Jesus goes on in his non-bumper-sticker kind of way. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt loses its saltiness, how could it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by men. There are a lot of different ideas about what this metaphor of salt losing its saltiness was referring to, but the essential point remains, and it's a point that the New Testament makes again and again, that uselessness invites disaster. If a Christian is not fulfilling his purpose as a Christian, then he is on his way to disaster.

So I ask us this morning, are we the "salt" of Erie? Are we bringing purity wherever we go, are we preserving the heart of our city and holding off decay and corruption wherever it rears its head? Are we bringing a zest

and a flavor in our community that makes them crave for more? Unfortunately sometimes Christians are just the opposite – we present a bland and lifeless picture of the Christian faith. We mope around like our faith is this curse until we get to the good stuff of heaven. We need to rediscover the lost radiance of the Christian life. In a worried world, we should be serene, in a depressed world, we should remain full of joy, there should be a sheer sparkle surrounding each Christ follower and each Christian church that arrests the attention of an on looking world.

Light of the World

14“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. *15*Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. *16*In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

I believe that the first line of this passage is the greatest compliment that has ever been given to an individual Christian. Light of the World was a title in the New Testament that was reserved for Jesus and Jesus alone. It is shocking that he turns around and gives his followers his own title. You are the light of the world. Then he goes on to say “a city on a hill cannot be hidden.” In one of his talks on servanthood (called “Mastering Servanthood”) John Ortberg does a masterful job painting a picture of some of the geographic realities that my have cemented this analogy to Jesus’ hearers.

He points out that when Jesus was a boy in Nazareth he lived near this amazing city named Sepphoris. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee where Jesus grew up. Antipas decided that he would build a great city and impress Caesar. So Herod Antipas built a city called Sepphoris. It was a large city with a population of 30,000 people, which was huge in Galilee. He built an enormous palace and a huge gymnasium. Sepphoris had its own mint, public baths, banks, a large temple, paved roads, a huge aqueduct and an elaborate sewer system.

Antipas decided that Sepphoris was the way that he would impress the Emperor with his devotion to Rome, because it would look like Rome with its marble and gold, and it would impress the Jews with his power and his wealth. Josephus, a first century historian, said that Sepphoris was called the “ornament of Galilee.” It was built on a hill so that its splendor could be seen for miles and miles around.

By contrast, down in one of the lower regions about three miles away Nazareth had a population of about 300 people. It basically consisted of several extended families. That’s all there were. Nazareth was not the ornament of anything. In fact, in all the writings of the ancient documents, the Mishnah and the Talmud, 63 different cities of Galilee are mentioned. Nazareth is not mentioned one single time. This is where Jesus grew up – this is where God incarnate chose to live his early life. In fact there is a story in John 1. A guy named Philip finds his brother, Nathaniel, and says: “Come with me and see. We have found the One, Jesus of Nazareth. He’s the one we’ve been waiting for.” And Nathaniel’s response is: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:45-46) All of Nazareth fit on about ten acres of land. There were no public buildings. There were no paved roads. There were no sewers. Half the population would have died in childbirth. Of those that survived, average life expectancy was thirty-something. That’s where Jesus grew up. He chose Nazareth. You can see Sepphoris as clear as a bell from most places in Galilee, and that was what Herod Antipas intended. He wanted it to be the pinnacle of the region. He wanted people to look at Sepphoris and go: Wow!

As Jesus delivered this Sermon on the Mount in Galilee, his listeners may have been able to see Sepphoris over his shoulder as he was talking. In fact he may have pointed up at Sepphoris when he said that a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. He took the beauty and splendor and majesty of that city and he compared it to us and to the church. He said that he’s going to build a city so beautiful that it will take your breath away . . . that it cannot be hidden. But that he’s not going to build it of marble and gold, he’s going to build it in lives that are so sold out to the Kingdom of God, that the world will stand back and say “wow.” And those individual lights are going to congregate in these small communities called churches that are going to provide light to entire cities.

And what is this light that Jesus talks about? Is it the light of truth – that Christians are going to be right about every issue both political and theological? Is it the light of worship – that we will sing good songs and pray good prayers and somehow influence the world through that? No, listen, Jesus is very clear. He tells us what the light is. The light is the good deeds of believers that happen in the community that others will take notice of. And this particular kind of good deed will not draw attention to the individual doing them or even to the organization that's responsible for them, if done correctly, these good deeds in the community will bring glory to God and God alone. He will get the credit. He will get the acclaim. And lives will be won to His kingdom by the simple selfless actions of his followers.

As Jesus paints a picture of his kingdom with these two compelling images salt and light; a kingdom whose weapons are rakes and brooms and visits and listening ears and open hands and generous hearts and emptying wallets and quick gifts, his hearers must have been thinking that there has never been a community like this before. Never been a vision like this before. Then shortly after Jesus cast that vision it began to take shape with the oddest kind of people - a new kind of greatness - a new kind of city on a hill. Communities filled with changing people and adding salt and light to a bland and dark world. And old Sepphoris, that city on a hill that was so amazing to so many people, the city that impressed everyone with Herod Antipas' wealth and power, well it's been rubble for many centuries. But Jesus' city is still growing. And now it's our turn at the plate. We must hold that vision up next to us as individuals and as a church and ask what must we do during our time?

APPLICATION

So what does this statement that we are salt and light mean for Erie, PA in 2007?

Corporately

1. *ServErie – Remember the poor.* Paul was a bit of a rogue missionary. And I'm not sure that the early church fathers knew what to do with Paul. There came a moment when all the biggies got together in a room and hammered it out. Peter, James, and John were there along with Paul and Barnabas. They came to agreement that they could co-exist, that the mission was big enough for all of them. But listen as Paul describes the only thing they asked him to do as he embarked on his mission.

They saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. 8For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. 9James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. 10All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor,
Galatians 2:7-10

27Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 1:27

Remember the poor. Remember the needy. Poverty manifests itself in many different ways other than physical poverty. There is spiritual poverty, emotional poverty, relational poverty, etc. But I've come to a realization. Over here in the suburbs we have a proximity problem from some of the greatest needs – there are many problems here too don't get me wrong – but our proximity is removed from some of the neediest people in our community.

In January we're going to be launching a new initiative that I pray will change the landscape of Grace forever. It's an initiative called ServErie and our goal is that it will put our church in proximity with some of the neediest people in our region so that we can share with them through our good deeds the love and grace of a caring God.

This will happen in a couple of different ways. The first is through seeking creative partnerships with organizations in town that are already caring for the needs of different segments of people. For some things – we won't need to reinvent the wheel but simply provide some manpower and help to groups that are already serving the community. We will be looking to form partnerships with groups like Habitat for Humanity, Mother to Mother, St Martin Center, Kiwanis Club, and others.

The second way this will happen is through providing leadership and unification to some of the informal resource providers in our community for families who are in desperate need. We have found through some recent examples that when families who are struggling and need help with simple home repairs or projects that would benefit their families, that there are individuals, agencies, and churches out there who are willing to provide resources and support to help, but there is no one taking the lead. Why not us?

2. *Start Personal Ministries* – I'm so pleased that our very first endeavor in our new building is going to be our Thanksgiving project for the community. I think it is just perfect. It's a great symbolic moment that our first weekend in the building it will be filled with boxes and turkeys and in a way we're saying that this sparkling new building was never about us. It has always been about making room to do this mission more effectively. That Thanksgiving ministry that has had such an impact started from an idea from an individual who said, "Why couldn't we do this?" We need to continue to stay on the front edge of ministry opportunities. When individuals begin to involve themselves in serving the community – Erie becomes a little more salty and a little less dark.

3. *Celebrate Public Servants/ Agencies* – We're also going to be launching a new initiative in the next year called our Community Spotlight Program. And the goal of that program is that we as a church on a regular basis will celebrate, and thank, and honor people who serve our community in a variety of different ways. Public servants, charity organizations, social agencies, etc.

There may have been a day when it was possible for somebody around here to say, this church has so many resources, so many staff, so many gifts, I'm not needed. I can just be a spectator. If that day ever really existed, let me officially declare that that day is over. This is an all-hands-on deck moment for us as a church. To realize this vision of being change-agents in our community, it is going to take every single one of us. It's going to take everybody.

And you may be thinking right now, this sounds like a lot of change, and I don't like change? What if I have a friend who just wants to come to a regular traditional old church? I would say to you that there are churches like that on every corner. Most of them are dying. Your friend can find one like that real easily, if that's what they want to find. But I want to know, who's going to reach the people ... who's going to care about the people that those churches don't reach? I want to know who will go after those who are far from God?

And what if it were our church? And what if it were you? Let's just dream a little bit. What might God do by turning this church loose in our community? Over the next ten years, what if the crime rate in Erie were cut in half, and groups of drug dealers disbanded because followers of Jesus came along and walked alongside of them and welcomed them into a better day? What if in McKean some folks got a heart for marriages and divorce rates went down and spousal abuse went down and child abuse declined? What if little children born into settings where, right now, they start with two strikes against them, and political systems are not going to save them - what if they were able to have somebody come alongside them and be Jesus with them and give them hope? What if high school graduation rates in problem neighborhoods of the region would double? What if there were a Spirit-induced contagion of generosity in the business community and in the corporate world around us, and Erie became more known for its generosity than for its manufacturing? What if Jesus just turned Grace loose in our city? You are the salt of the earth and light of the world.

Individually

1. *Pay attention to what is going on in our community* – When businesses leave town, when casinos open in town, when sports teams win or lose, when issues are being debated, when a home is lost in a fire, when a child perishes unnecessarily, it is important for Christians to be aware, so that they can act and so that they can pray. You've been called to this city. You are here to be salt and light. The least we can do is to be aware of what is going on. What are key issues? Did you know that Erie is one of the leading cities in America for taking in foreign refugees? I saw a BBC special a year ago and they were talking about this safe haven – this city of refuge in America that takes in and cares for foreign refugees – did you know they were talking about Erie?

I've dreamed for years of someone or some team of people who would make it their personal ministry to use the Erie Times as a prayer tool for our community. To read through the stories in our city and pray for people who are affected and send notes of encouragement or condolence where it's appropriate.

2. *Serve on Community Boards* – There are so many great agencies out there. Mother to Mother, Habitat, find something you're passionate about and serve. And then let us know about it here so that we can support you and encourage you in every way possible.

3. *Frequent same establishments and seek out same person*— read from Outflow pp. 168-169. Jesus' plan gets this small. It's as big as you can imagine and as small as you can imagine. His plan is that if there's a busboy in a restaurant who's struggling to support his family, when one of Jesus' followers come in, it should be good news for that busboy.

On May 1, 1895, nineteen believers met for the first time, unofficially, as the Swedish Baptist Church. They met in a home at 7th and Holland in downtown Erie until 1906. In 1906 that small band of people took a huge pioneering step. They tore down the home that they were meeting in to build a church in its place. Early members of the Swedish Baptist Church had a heart to make a difference for God in the Erie area. They made a substantial contribution to the religious progress in Erie – they were pioneers. In the late 50's this pioneering spirit took another bold step in the investment in a few acres of land in rapidly growing West Millcreek. With attendance numbers and finances both in a holding pattern, they took a bold step and moved to 38th Street so that the Kingdom of God could extend and advance in Erie.

We are a church of pioneers. That's who we are. That pioneering spirit far pre-dated 1906. We follow the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who went to the Cross. We follow men and women like Paul, who sat in a prison cell with chains around him and prayed not "God, get me out of here," not "God make me free," not "God, protect me from the chaos of the world out there and make my life more stable," but "God, open a door. Open a door! I'll go through it! I'll be in chains! Open a door." That's who we are. We are a church of pioneers. And those who have gone before us have left a legacy of faithful follower-ship –even if it meant risk, even if it meant hanging out on some limbs that were pretty shaky, even if it meant getting into some situations where unless God came through they would be in big trouble. We come from a long line of risk-takers for the kingdom, those who laid it all on the line for the good of the lost in the community. And now it is our turn at the plate.

When we talk about reaching out the community and serving the Erie region like never before and building a new church in anticipation of what God is going to do, there are some who ask, "Why are we doing this? Is this just about making our church bigger, so that the leaders of the church can feel better about themselves? If that's the deal, let's just get them good therapy. It would be a lot cheaper." That's always a fair question. Speaking as one of the members of the leadership community here, I can say that leaders are very fallen and very human people. "Don't we have enough people already?" There are those who are already part of this church who think, "Shouldn't somebody else do something? Why should we do this?"

It will take a moment to answer that. I'd like you to do something first, if you would. Take out any pictures that you have that you carry with you – they may be in your wallet or your purse or cell phone or blackberry. I'm not going to ask for an offering, so don't worry about that. If you're a schmuck like me and not good about carrying pictures you may just have to use your imagination. Most people will have a few pictures of people who are important to them. Just scroll through them for a moment.

Do you have anyone in those pictures about whose spiritual life you have concerns? Is anybody in one of those pictures at a point where things are sort of shaky between them and God? If you do, I'll tell you something. You are hoping against hope that somebody in this world will care for that person. That somebody in their world is going to notice them and pray for them and do something to reach out to them. You are hoping that some church in the town where they live is not content that things are going OK inside the walls, but that they will be creative, and they will have compassion, and they will be generous, and they will take risks, and they will help that person that you love find God.

Why would we look at doing something like this? Because everybody that you lock eyes with is someone's son or daughter. Behind every door of every home that you passed on the way to church here this morning lives a person for whom Jesus died—a person who faces an eternal destiny of Heaven or Hell. And we must take our role as salt and light extremely seriously.

The mission of the church is not to make sure that things are going on OK inside our building while the rest of the world goes to Hell. The mission of this church is to locate as many people who haven't yet tasted the love and grace and relationship that flows from the living God and provide them with a compelling and meaningful opportunity to respond to His love. And if the church on Monday isn't more compelling, and bold, and delightful, and majestic, and meaningful than it is on Sunday, then we have to go back to the drawing board.