

Brookfield Congregational Church – UCC
Copper Kettles and Buttonholes
February 6, 2011
Psalm 112:1-9, Matthew 5:13-20

A Bible teacher was speaking to a class of adults on the Christian's responsibility to be a "light" for the world. The teacher emphasized that Christ's followers should reflect Christ's light.

After class, one of the students told the teacher a story from his childhood that had helped him understand this instruction.

One day, the student went to his basement to retrieve an item. While he was there, he made an interesting discovery. Some forgotten potatoes had sprouted and were growing potato vines in the darkest corner of the basement. At first, he couldn't figure out how the potatoes could get enough light to grow.

Then he noticed that the cook had hung a copper kettle from the ceiling near a basement window. The cook kept the kettle so brightly polished that it reflected the light coming through the window onto the potatoes in the corner.

The student told his teacher, "When I saw that, I thought I may not be a preacher or a teacher with ability to explain scripture, but at least I can be a copper kettle catching rays of God's light and reflecting them to someone in a dark corner."

Like the Bible teacher in this story, Matthew's gospel has spent the last several weeks exhorting us to be light for the world.

Sometimes that can seem an overwhelming task, but I'm going to suggest this morning that we borrow a lesson from the story of the copper kettle.

Before I explain what I mean, I'm going to lay down a set of assumptions. I assume that we want to be good Christians, but we have our hands full, most of us, just fulfilling the obligations of daily life, raising our children and grandchildren, assisting elderly parents, or taking care of our own aging bodies. We have bills to pay and money to earn or investments to monitor. We try to be good citizens, volunteering whatever spare time we have in a variety of causes, including this church.

I'm going to assume that sometimes we want to ask God, "What else do you want from me?"

The good news this morning is that sometimes God is really just saying, "Blessings on you, dear friend. You are salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

Sometimes, the word from on high is not, "Get the lead out. I need you to do fifteen more things." Sometimes the word from on high is, "You're doing great. Keep on keeping on."

Notice that in Matthew's reading, Jesus does not say, "If you want to **become** salt and light, do this and this and this." He does not say, "Before I call you salt and light, I need to see a better performance from you." This is not a performance review. This is a statement of love to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

Yes, I know that the text says something about salt losing its saltiness and lights not being able to shine if they're kept under a basket.

But salt is not in charge of its own saltiness and a candle does not put itself under a basket or on a lamp stand—any more than the copper kettle hangs itself up on a hook in the basement or polishes itself to a light-reflecting gleam.

God gives you your saltiness and God gives you opportunities to shine, just as the cook gave the copper kettle its chance to shine.

And yes, I know that some of you are still saying, "But I don't have any special talents. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm not very salty. I'm pretty sure I'm not as shiny as that copper kettle. I don't know what I have to offer God."

Well, can you be a buttonhole? In a lovely little poem called "Famous," poet Naomi Shahib Nye writes: "I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous, or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular, but because it never forgot what it could do."

Consider the buttonhole. It certainly is not spectacular. The buttonhole is not fancy; it doesn't sing, dance, tell stories, construct buildings, cure cancer or cook a great meal. In fact, we don't usually notice the buttonhole at all, although we may notice its partner, the button, especially if the button is a fancy decorative one. Yet without the buttonhole, the fanciest button in the world is useless. The buttonhole is not spectacular, but it is absolutely necessary.

Some of us are buttonholes. We are not showy or glitzy. We don't draw attention to ourselves. The world does not give us much notice. And yet, in our quiet way, we too have an essential role to play. Isn't that the way salt is? It isn't shiny like gold or gorgeous like a sunset, it isn't exotic like truffle oil or saffron. It's just salt. And yet the world of eating would be flat without it.

Whether you are a very public person whom everyone notices or a private person who often slips through life unnoticed, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world—just in your ordinary walking-around lives. And God can use you just as you are, just where you are.

Think of the people who have been salt and light for you, the people who have touched you with their kindness, with their faithfulness. Think of the parent or grandparent or teacher who first taught you that God loves you. They probably weren't spectacular people, their names weren't up in lights—but they were light and salt for you.

Every time you reach out in kindness to someone who is hurting, every time you teach a Sunday school class, or teach your child to respect others; every time you serve on a committee—here or

in the community; every time you acknowledge with gratitude the good work of an employee; every time you take time out of your busy day to visit someone who is home bound or in a nursing home; every time you donate blood or write a check to a charity; every time you smile instead of bark at an overworked and overwhelmed store clerk; every time you say, “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you”; every time you take the risk to share your faith in God with someone who needs God...every single time you do one of these simple, humble acts...you are being light for the world, salt of the earth.

And God uses these every day kindnesses to reach the hopeless, harried and hurting, the despondent and the destitute—even though you may have no idea that you are doing something beautiful for God. You are just being your usual copper kettle or buttonhole self.

I’ll tell you a story about someone who God used in my life. It was a long time ago and I was a student at the University of Redlands in Southern California. My sophomore year was awful. I won’t go into details, but I will tell you that I was struggling with overwhelming grief and guilt. I was in a dark and scary place.

One person who reached out to me during that time was the chaplain of the University, Rev. George Graham. I worked for him as his office assistant and saw him for counseling. Rev. Graham was a steady, kind, non-judgmental presence, and he helped me survive that terrible year.

I transferred my junior year, and Rev. Graham left the university and moved to Illinois to pursue other interests a couple of years later. But for several years we exchanged Christmas cards.

And then in a cross-country move, I lost my Christmas card list with George Graham’s address. I knew that he had left ministry, and I didn’t have any way to get in touch with him or he with me. So we lost touch—for the better part of forty years.

This past fall, I got to thinking about George Graham, as I often have over the years. And I was thinking how much I would like to thank him for being one of the lights who showed the way for me.

Today’s Internet makes searching for people much easier. After forty years, I thought it was a long shot, but it occurred to me that the current chaplain at the University of Redlands might just know where George was. So I wrote him an e-mail, identifying myself and asking whether he might know George Graham’s whereabouts. Shortly after Christmas, I received an e-mail from Redlands—with an address and a phone number.

I called the number that day and got the answering machine, so I left a message explaining who I was and why I was calling. That evening, I tried again and George answered the phone. After forty years, I still recognized his voice.

Now here’s the best part—the truly amazing part of this story. Do you know where George and his wife live? Delafield, Wisconsin. They have lived in Wisconsin for the past 40 years.

In fact, when they first moved to Wisconsin, Patti, George's wife, needed to get a Wisconsin teaching credential. While she worked on completing the requirements, she taught in a nursery school. Guess where that nursery school was located. Right here in this very building!

I learned about that amazing coincidence when George and Patti and I met for lunch in early January.

Now, I have to tell you, I remembered George, but he didn't really remember me. He was the only chaplain at the University of Redlands when I was there, but there were hundreds of students, and dozens who worked in the chaplain's office and received counseling. And George had no idea that he had made such a difference in the life of this one student...not until I had the opportunity to thank him in person a few short weeks ago.

George didn't know that he was light and salt for one troubled student. And yet, forty years later I could tell him he was one of my angels. And he is one of the reasons I'm in front of you today.

Sometimes, we are accidental angels, sent by God just when we're needed, and not even aware of the difference we make. Such was the case with Naomi Shihab Nye, the poet I quoted a little while ago.

Naomi moved with her family to San Antonio, Texas, as a teenager. Soon after she arrived, she saw an article about the McNay Art Museum in a local magazine. The McNay was a lovely old mansion with an amazing collection of art and free admission. Naomi called her friend Sally who had a car, and they decided to visit the museum that Saturday afternoon.

"Do you know the address?" Sally asked. "No" said Naomi, "just drive slowly and I'll recognize it; there was a picture in the magazine." She spotted the mansion. They parked and walked in.

The beauty of the art and architecture entranced them immediately. Sally went left and Naomi went right. A group of people sitting in chairs in the lobby stopped their conversation and stared at the two young women. "May I help you?" one asked. "No, we're fine!" answered Naomi.

Sally headed upstairs. Naomi stepped into the next room to admire some beautiful sculptures and a radiant print by her favorite artist, Paul Klee.

One of the people followed her and stood in the doorway, eyeing her suspiciously. Then he asked, "Where do you think you are?" "The McNay Art Museum!" she answered. The man shook his head and smiled. "The McNay is on New Braunfels Street, three blocks over." "What is this place?" she asked in confusion. "Well," said the man, "we thought it was our home."

Naomi rushed past him to the bottom of the stairs. "Sally!" she yelled, "Come down immediately! Urgent!" Sally came to the top of the stairs and said, "You have to come up here!"

There's some really good stuff! And there are old beds, too!" "No, Sally, no!" Naomi cried. "Get down here! Now! This is an emergency!"

Sally glided down the stairs in a museum trance. Naomi pushed her out the front door, waving at the family sitting in their front room, saying, "Sorry, oh my gosh, forgive us, you have a really nice place!" Laughing wildly, the girls went on over to the McNay Museum. And they never told anyone about their adventure.

Thirty years later, Naomi was approached by a woman in a public place. "Excuse me," the woman said, "I need to ask you a strange question. Did you ever, by any chance, enter a residence, long ago, thinking it was the McNay Museum?"

"Yes," Naomi answered, her cheeks burning with embarrassment, "but how do you know? I never told anyone!"

"That was my home," the woman answered:

The woman went on, "I was a teenager sitting with my family talking in the living room. Before that day, I never realized what a beautiful place I lived in. I never felt lucky until I saw our house through your eyes. My feelings changed about my parents after that, too. They had good taste. I've always wanted to thank you."ⁱ

Whether you know it or not, whether you are a copper kettle, shined to a light-reflecting gleam or a buttonhole, humbly doing what you know how to do, God is using each and every one of you to be salt and light for the world. You are all accidental angels. And for the wonder of that great gift, thanks be to God.

ⁱNaomi Shihab Nye, *Honeybee: Poems and Short Prose*, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. 17-21