

I was around 17. I had recently undergone a very powerful spiritual experience. One evening on a hillside out in the country on a youth retreat, I had felt in my whole being the beauty and grandeur and intensity of love, whatever God was, I felt it in my bones. God was love. Love for the cosmos as a whole, for every star in planet, for every blade of grass on the hill on which I was sitting. Love for every cow in the pasture on the other side of the barbed wire fence, love for the crickets, singing in the hay fields, and I was included in that great big love as well. Shortly after that experience, I was introduced to a spiritual mentor. His name was Rod. I met Rod on another retreat where I was the aspiring hippie guitar player, and Rod was the speaker. Rod was a high school teacher who was helping young people like me have a connection to God outside of traditional religious structures.

And something he said touched me very deeply. He said, Brian, most of your fellow students are trying their hardest to be cool, but you can choose a different goal to be warm. You can make it your ambition to be a warm and loving presence in the world as Jesus was. The idea of religion making you different was not a new idea to me. But in my experience, religion made you different. In an odd, outdated, and maybe even harsh and judgmental way to be a Christian was to hold yourself apart from secular people and people of other faiths. It meant to see the other as a dangerous influence who might draw you away from the true faith and the true church. This kind of spiritual apartheid made you critical of your neighbors kind of hovering above them with a feeling of God-given superiority. It made you inherently conservative, looking back to good old days, and it made you a little afraid of the future and even the present because they might take you farther away from God.

But Rod was saying something very different. Our calling was to be joyfully in the world, in deep solidarity with our neighbors, not holding ourselves a lure apart from them, loving them as equals rather than considering ourselves, holier than thou, and therefore better than them. Seeking to compassionately understand every person around us, every neighbor, rather than judging them or evaluating them for where they fit on our scales or standards. Those words from my mentor, Rod shaped me, don't aim to be cool, aim to be warm, a loving presence and the world. And of course, Rod was just echoing what Jesus said in the most intense concentrated example of his public teaching that we have. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with a set of sayings that begin with. Blessed are most people interpret these statements as a way of saying God blesses these people to the exclusion of others.

But I've come to understand the beatitudes as a way of saying something very, very different. The Beatitudes say We in this new movement, bless the very people who are usually excluded. So Jesus says in this movement, we bless the poor and the poor in spirit. We bless those who mourn. We bless the meek or gentle. We bless those who hunger and thirst for justice. We bless the merciful and the pure heart. We bless the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for standing up for justice. Then he continues because we bless people who are usually forgotten or despised or excluded. We see the world differently and that different way

of seeing the world leads to a different way of being in the world. And here are his exact words to describe this. You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt is lost its taste.

How can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but it's thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. Rather, they put it on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven in 2024. Our theme for the daily meditations was radical resilience. We considered how we can bounce back from setbacks and remain strong in difficult times. In 2025, we'd like to go beyond just surviving difficult times. We'd like to focus on being a presence in this world that radiates and flavors the world with divine love, a warm and healing presence to a world that is dealing with so much being salt and light. That will be our theme for the Daily meditations. In 2025, a contemplative way of seeing the world leads to an active way of being in the world as a warm and loving presence. Radiant with a light of love and truth, justice and compassion, flavorful assault, preserving and enhancing, all that is good in the world. Welcome to being salt and light.