

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³“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 underfoot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Salt and Light January 5, 2017

Our reading today follows directly from last week which was the sermon on the mount where Jesus was teaching the disciples who they should be favoring and caring for and even aspiring to be like. And that of course was the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted, and of course all the rest which you remember. And it seems that these images of light and salt belong with this list of attributes for those who are truly following Jesus and his Way. And we're pretty sure Jesus was suggesting that those scribes and Pharisees were sucking the salt and light out of life and we should strive to be better than that.

And all this talk of salt got me thinking about...food of course. It might even have made my blood pressure go up a bit when I considered all the salt that I encounter on a daily basis. If you look on any food product label you will see a list of ingredients where you will most likely find salt somewhere in the product.

In the last few years we have all become a bit more health conscious in regards to the food we eat. Many of us as we stroll through the grocery store pick up those items we love and read the labels to see what is in them. Sometimes that makes us think twice about our choices. Sometimes not. If you didn't know it, the most prominent ingredients are listed first and that's important to us as we make decisions about what we put in our bodies. If you happen to pick up some Mac and Cheese and look at the label you can see that the first ingredient is something called 'enriched macaroni product.' Followed by ferrous nitrate(iron), thiamin mononitrate(b1) a couple other vitamins, and then cheesy sauce mix (whatever that is), salt a little further down the list.

If you pick up a can of spam the first ingredients are pork and ham with salt being the second ingredient. Now we're getting somewhere. One of our favorites is this package of Salt and Vinegar Potato Chips. It has potatoes, oil, and then salt and vinegar. And let me tell you, there is so much salt and vinegar in these it will make your mouth pucker. There is this amazing sensation when you put that first chip in your mouth! It almost overwhelms your senses at first and then you just can't stop eating them. (eat the chips) It is one of our guilty pleasures at our house and we don't have them very often, but what an image for being salt in the world. If Jesus had only had a bag of these to pass around, what an illustration that would have been! What would the world you live in be like if you had that effect on those around you? What if your love and care and acceptance of others was so powerful that those around you were saying, "I'll have one of those too! Bet you can't eat just one! Pass the chips please!"

Another product that I love and use frequently is one called Himalayan Pink Salt. You may use it too. I love it and it is supposed to be very good for you and besides all that it just looks beautiful. And recently we bought a lamp made out of it. It's all the rage these days. It looks like a big rock of pink salt and it has a light inside. I call it, the lighted salt lick. But apparently, if you believe everything they say about it, it purifies the air, helps you sleep, eases your allergies, aligns the ions in the air, reduces static, and lots of other things. It won't change who you are, only God can do that I suppose, but it does serve as a wonderful image doesn't it? As a Christian you are like this beautiful hunk of salt that is lit from within. You are, *the lighted salt lick of the world*, and I just think that's the most interesting and fun image of being a Christian that I can think of. Though certainly not without challenge. Because we know that being salt and light in the world requires courage and risk.

And we don't all agree about what kind of salt and light we want to be in the world. You only need to listen to the news or look at your Facebook feed to see that we sometimes understand Jesus differently. But if we think of the sermon on the mount as a list of ingredients that make up this journey of faith then maybe we can agree that these are the elements that define our character and our faith, with love and acceptance being the first ingredient.

There was a beautiful story I came across about a man who built a cross for a Christian church that was sacked by Isis rebels. His name is Marwan who is a Muslim living in Iraq. When Isis destroyed, and sacked the church in Mosel, he couldn't accept the fact that these other guys who claimed to be Muslims were rampaging through this place, destroying the signs and icons of his Christian friends, his Christian compatriots, his Christian neighbors. So, he gathered some pieces of broken metal and fashioned a cross for them. He did it to say on behalf of his Muslim faith and to his Christian neighbors, "We are in this together. This cross stands for something and it belongs here in our country, this cross belongs here among our friends, this cross is something to be honored." Jeremy Courtney who posted the story goes on to say that, "Marwan's faith and kindness is something to be honored. These aren't stories that we hear enough about of what actually plays out on the ground in Aleppo and Mosul. But the simple story of Muslim vs Christian or Isis versus everyone else in the world; it just doesn't hold up in this church, with this cross, fashioned by a Muslim, out of the wreckage of war."

I couldn't help but think of Marwan as a person of Salt and Light. Someone who reminded his neighbors that there is still love and acceptance in the world even when that world is filled with difficulties and danger. It was just a couple pieces of metal but I'm sure it meant so much more to the church and her members. He was salt and light reminding them that they are loved. Now granted, our lives are pretty calm by comparison, but maybe that is what Jesus is reminding us of today as well, and that is, that we too are Salt and Light. He didn't say, "You will become salt and light or you will grow to be more salty or lighty"- (is that even a word?) And while some of you may get a little saltier in your old age, I think Jesus means to tell us that WE ARE already, Salt and Light in the world. Our very presence brings flavor and illumination to an oft times bland and dim world. And how sad it is if we don't claim that and live that. We spend a lot of time thinking we will grow up and be something later, but maybe we need to be reminded daily that we are fully ready right now to be light and salt in the world. This is a gift of grace and it is yours to bring comfort and joy to the world you live in.

And how will we be salt and light in the world? Perhaps by remembering those words from Isaiah this morning to, "loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." To share your bread with the hungry. To bring the homeless into your house. When you see the naked to clothe them. And don't hide from your own community or your own family who may be in need as well. And if you do these things your light will shine like the dawn's rising sun and others will be blessed because of you. That you will be a beautiful garden of grace whose waters never run dry. Sounds a lot like something Jesus might say, doesn't it? I wonder where he got these crazy ideas?

So how might you do these things both great and small right here in your little part of the world? Well, there are two new ministries that have started in our neighborhoods. *My Neighbors* is a volunteer network for both Mitchell and Yancey Counties, helping those who are elderly stay in their homes by providing assistance with repairs, visits, transportation to the doctors or shopping. They help you with your technical gadgets and computer problems. And they call and check in on folks, being good listeners. They need volunteers and donors to do all this and maybe that's something you might like to do.

Another opportunity came across my path with a group called the Toe River Food Security Network which is listed as a 2-1-1 service. 2-1-1 is a free and confidential service that helps people in need find local resources including food, housing, utilities, health, housing, and disaster assistance. Any Yancey County resident in need of services can call 2-1-1 or go to their united way website to search the online database.

They're currently updating their database for resources in Yancey county and were wondering if any of our programs here at Grassy Creek or Newdale Presbyterian, particularly Feed My Sheep, were willing to be listed as resources in the database? And maybe that is something we should be talking about?

There is of course our own Feed My Sheep and Care Programs where you can also volunteer to relieve the suffering and hunger of others. Your generous support and participation in these programs have already made a significant difference to many in our two counties. Like salt and light, these are just normal everyday things that can be a blessing to others and oh, how a box of canned goods and a visit can light up a person's life!

You are Salt and Light in the world and I'll be curious to hear how that plays out in your experience. For some, it may mean that you protest in public forums or it may mean that you become a prayer warrior for the world. It may mean that you deliver meals or maybe make a phone call to a shut-in or someone you have been estranged from. It may mean being a good listener or being the one who always has a funny story to tell, the kind that even a child would laugh at. Who knows where the Spirit will lead you.

I want to close today with a song text written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. It is a gift that she shared with the church this week and her wonderful texts always give me hope and I hope they will for you as well. It is called "A Little Bit of Salt"

A Little Bit of Salt

LEONI 6.6.8.4 ("The God of Abraham Praise")

A little bit of salt will quickly show its worth;
A little bit of faithfulness will change the earth.
God, make us worth our salt— a church that's glad to be
The change that you desire in each community.

A lamp that's in a house gives safety, warmth and light;
It's set upon a table where it shines so bright.
God, make your church a light that bravely takes a stand
To bring your love and justice into all the land.

A garden is a place where so much beauty grows,
Where flowers bloom and food is raised and water flows.
When worship leads us out to care for the oppressed,
O God, you say we're like a garden at its best.

When worship leads us out to love and serve the poor,
To welcome in the immigrant* at our own door,
O God, then we'll be called "repairers of the breach,"
And we your church will be "restorers of the streets."

It's tempting to remain well-hidden, quiet, bland—
Yet, God, you make us salt and light to change this land.
You send us out to love, to build and to repair,
Till peace and justice flourish here and everywhere.

* "refugee" can be used instead of "immigrant"

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