

**“Pass the Salt! Light the Light!”**

Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

February 9, 2020, Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

“Could you preach on salt?” was her question to me.

I was a few minutes into the visit with Marshall’s family when this question came. Marshall had died three days prior to my visit with his wife and two children at his bedside. He was a long time, faithful and active member of the congregation I served in Mitchellville, just a short distance from here. Quite often, Marshall would call me at the church office around 5 PM, and say, “Don’t stay too long at church today. It’s time you’re getting home.” Pastors love those calls, by the way.

Marshall’s family decided to celebrate his life by going to his favorite restaurants. So, on the evening I arrived to discuss his funeral service, they had been to Grumps for breakfast; Red, Hot and Blue for lunch; and Grace’s Fortune for dinner. Needless to say, I wasn’t convinced that we were going to accomplish much planning from these overly satiated individuals slumped into the chairs and the sofa after a day of binging.

But we started talking about Marshall’s favorite hymns, Bible stories that he loved, how they wanted him remembered and who would be giving the eulogy. After some moments of sharing and conversation, his daughter asked, “Could you preach on salt? My father loved salt!” She was right about that.

Marshall honored his salt restricted diet but made sure that he got his daily allotment. He would never think of calling salt, the white devil, the term he heard his doctors use. Salt was essential to bring out the true taste in his food, the “zest” as he always put it.

I had never really had a question about my sermon topic for a funeral service. My sermons for these occasions of loss always focus on a message of resurrection, hope, and the promise that in life and in death we belong to God.

But Salt???? Could I preach on salt? “It would be such an honor to my Dad’s memory,” his daughter continued to argue her point. “And you know it’s in the Bible. I think salt was very important to Jesus.” “You do, do you? Okay! At your Dad’s funeral, I will preach on salt.”

Then I went home, got my Bible and turned to *Matthew 5:13*, this morning’s text. “You are the salt of the earth!” Jesus’ very words to the disciples. I guess salt was important to Jesus.

It’s early in Jesus’ ministry. The disciples have been called. Jesus has gone through Galilee teaching and healing and already the crowds are following him. So, he goes up the mountain and the disciples come to him. He begins to speak and teach. That’s what he should do, right? These disciples need to know and be equipped for this new job that’s going to require them to leave their homes and travel with Jesus. They need orientation.

Put yourselves on that mountain for a moment. Put yourself in this story. How are you sitting on that mountain? How are you feeling? What is your expectation for how you will be equipped to do this work?

I would prepare myself to take copious notes because I am an incurable note taker. Now, there's nothing wrong with being a note taker except that, in this case, **I might get the instruction, but miss the blessing.**

**Jesus is teaching, but he is also blessing.** This is way more than the Disciple Policy and Procedure Manual. Jesus is telling these followers who they are and to go into the world and be who they have been blessed to be.

You **are** the salt of the earth! You **are** the light of the world! You **are!!!!**

Jesus does not challenge us to attain this status. He does not call for more self-exertion so that we can accomplish being salt and light. There will be no certificates given at the end of the Sermon on the Mount indicating that we have completed salt and light training.

No! Jesus is telling us to be who we are and to believe what Jesus says about us. You **are** the salt of the earth! You **are** the light of the world!

We might think of it as that little shaker of crystals on our table that makes our food taste better, but **salt** has been instrumental in the history of civilization. In 2003, Mark Kurlansky authored a book called, "Salt; A World History." Kurlansky states in his introduction that salt is the rock, literally and figuratively that has shaped the history of the world, essential to civilizations for preservation of food, but much more. Everyone wanted it and needed it. It was the most sought-after commodity. People were often paid with salt. Brine wells were a common sight in early societies so that the crystals could be collected once the water evaporated. Salt influenced the establishment of trade routes and salt roads. Salt provoked financial wars, secured empires and inspired revolutions. In a province in China when a baby girl was born, the family would preserve vegetables every year of her life and give her this collection of preserved vegetables as a gift when she married. It was an important and highly regarded dowry.

Salt would also have had many connotations to the disciples listening to Jesus on that mountain. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, salt is referenced in *Leviticus*, *Ezekiel*, *Ezra*, *Numbers*, *Kings*, and *Job* as a metaphor for sacrifice, loyalty, faithfulness, binding relationships among peoples, and preserving the sacred law and its practices, bringing out the best.

So, what does it mean for us to be told that **we are the salt of the earth?** What does it mean to be salt in a life of faithfulness? **What are we supposed to preserve? What tastes are our lives supposed to enhance?** What are the tastes in the mouths of the world today? What tastes are in our mouths right at this moment?

Has the taste of bitterness, division, resentment, anger, vengeance, and suspicion overtaken our taste buds? We know that salt, as a physical element, doesn't ever really lose its saltiness, and salt as a metaphor for the covenant between God and humanity is not going to be lost, will never

be dissolved. But do some of our choices and decisions and the paths we follow cause our tastes and our lives to be overtaken, and our true identities to be concealed?

How can we be the salt of the earth and **preserve** the teachings of Jesus and God's intentions for grace, justice, love, community, and hope? How can the lives we live be the salt so that world can taste and see that the Lord is good?

It's not so easy to be the salt of this noisy earth.

There will be times when we get swept up in other tastes. But we do not generate the salt on our own. God is the source and when our lives become filled with the tastes that divide and destroy, God is with us to restore us as we are created to be.

You **are** the salt of the earth.

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You **are** the light of the world.

If you have spent any time at all in church, you are familiar with the metaphor of light used so often in the stories of our faith. Light is actually a metaphor used in many disciplines and spiritual practices. It familiar to us, but what does it mean for the way we live our lives?

One source that I checked said that light is used 272 times in the Bible; another said 294; and I wouldn't be surprised if it were more than that. Light and darkness is contrasted throughout the Bible. Jesus said, "I am the light." We are told to walk in the light. God is light and we are children of light. The Lord is my light and my salvation. The people who walked in the darkness have seen a great light. **And today, you are the light of the world.**

This electromagnetic radiation that is both wave and particle and travels at 186,282 miles per second in some of its wavelengths **makes visibility possible. Light allows things to be seen.**

Jesus says, "You know if you hide this light, then you are not being the light of the world." This is important because Jesus is not disparaging the world in this text, telling us to forget about it, and focus on heaven.

The place of our work and our mission is the world. That's our field. We are to let our light shine, to allow God's ways to be seen in our lives and in our choices not so we can get recognition and pats on the back, but so that God might be known.

The truth is that when we are the light of the world making God visible, we are often not going to get pats on the back. Light illumines truth and glares on what's working against it. Truth is not always popular. Sometimes even we want to hide it rather than face it.

One biblical scholar writes that when he hears this passage on salt and light, he thinks of a conversation that a parent might have or want to have with a child on the day they graduate from

high school as they prepare to go to college or into the work world. They encourage them to go into the world that can be very challenging and have confidence in who they are and what contributions they can take into the world.

But then, parents often take a step back and worry, not always trusting the words they have just spoken to their child. They want to give them rules for life, protect them (that's normal). They often helicopter and give advice that's not wanted and check on them in ways that's really none of their business. Instead of being that steady source always present, micromanagement easily sets in. It's happened to all of us in some of our relationships.

**That's not how God works.** Biblical scholar, Eugene Boring has said that the Gospel is not intended as rules for life. By affirming our identity, Jesus is stimulating our imagination and personal responsibility. Jesus **trusts** his own words to us, even as he does not to sugar coat it. He warns us that there is difficulty, challenge, and even unpopularity at times in being salt and light. But Jesus is that steady source, always present to us, that inner voice, always there to remind us who we are. Jesus does not give us a rulebook for life. How we come to know ourselves is not through rules, but through a relationship with Jesus.

Do **we** trust Jesus' words about us? Do **we** believe Jesus' words about us?

David Lose is a Lutheran pastor in Minnesota. He served as the president of the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia as well as a preaching professor at the seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. He writes a blog every week on the Gospel lesson and offers preachers what he calls, "the crazy idea of the week."

For this passage from *Matthew*, he writes that preachers should encourage their congregations to keep what he calls a "Salt and Light Log." He says to take notes, write down the occasions in your day or your week, when you have been the salt of the earth or the light of the world or when you have observed someone else being salt and light.

I liked this idea because I'm a note taker, but my colleagues just rolled their eyes at the thought that they were going to give their congregations one more thing to do. They thought the crazy idea of the week was crazy. "Besides," they said, "People don't like to tout and advertise good things that they do. It would be awful, just what we need- a goodness rivalry among our congregants. Well, I was salt and light 25 times this week. How about you?"

This wasn't Dr. Lose' intention; that each week we come together to present our scores. His point was to **raise awareness** of our true identity as the church of Jesus Christ at a grass roots level, to help people start looking for God at work in the world. His point was to help us come to believe and trust that we are the vessels through which God is at work. He put it this way.

"I have 4,000 preachers that read my blog each week. If 1,000 or one fourth of them are willing to try this Salt and Light Log idea and each of them get ten people to do it, that's 10,000 Christians naming specific occasions when they have observed or when they have been salt and light, sharing it, and growing into that identity more fully. Seeing something and being able to

say, “Yes! Yes! That’s who we are” or seeing something and saying, “No! No! That’s NOT who we are!”

The world needs salt! The world needs light and according to Jesus **we are that, the church is that!** Jesus said, I didn’t come to abolish what has been, the law and the prophets remain sacred, but we are not stuck there. The law and the prophets point beyond themselves to God’s work that must continue through us. Jesus said that he comes to fulfill the law, not with mere repetition, but transcendence so that the mercy, justice, love, faithfulness, and hope become the weightier matters. The history of salvation centered in Christ is not a rejection of all that gone before, but an affirmation.

God’s work continues, and in 2020, is not yet complete. So, by the power of the Holy Spirit who is our source and strength, go out into the rough and tumble of this world, which is our work place, and **pass the salt and light the light.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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