

Mt. 5, salt and light, Feb. 2017

This morning's Gospel lesson, as I'm sure you noticed, is all about salt and light. You are the salt of the earth, Jesus tells us. You are the light of the world, Jesus declares. As professing Christians, we believe in Jesus. But here are two important questions to consider this morning: Do we believe what Jesus says about us? And, do we believe that Jesus believes in us? Are you salt? Are you light? Let's give this some thought.

Salt and light are elemental, terribly ancient, and also immediately contemporary. It wouldn't surprise me to learn you'd encountered both salt and light this morning already; in fact, I'd doubt you if you claimed you hadn't. Did you eat breakfast? Salt is in so many things, even if we don't realize it. Most cereals have salt, as does bread, and plenty of us put salt on eggs, if that's what you had. And you almost certainly turned on electric lights as you moved about your house, showered, ate breakfast, got dressed, and so on. But, although salt and light are extraordinarily common and have seemingly been around forever, the way they were understood in the ancient world and the way we understand them *now* are surprisingly different. Which means we miss some of the nuances of Jesus' surprising description of us.

To consider salt first, keep in mind that for us, it typically comes out of a shaker and is as common as....grass...or oxygen molecules....or snow at the moment. We absolutely take salt for granted, which is a hugely different perspective than that of Jesus' time and world. Because listen to these words about salt in the ancient world from "The History behind the Salt Shaker" which I found online. "To say the history of salt is essentially the history of the world is not an overstatement. Some call salt a "primordial

condiment," and rightfully so. Our modern-day uses of salt are a culmination of centuries-worth of cultures who coveted salt as a precious, rare, and indispensable commodity. To have salt readily available is a very *recent* luxury—a luxury by which Egyptian pharaohs and European kings would have been astonished.” *This* was the cultural reality into which Jesus declared to his followers: “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt was as valuable as gold; in fact, in the Middle Ages, salt was referred to as “white gold”. So what we think of as commonplace now, was in fact, rare and valuable then.

Next, let’s consider light. I came to a new appreciation of the importance of a source of light last July when my neighborhood in Duluth lost power for 3 days. Some of you experienced power outages as well. It was the middle of the summer, so there was plenty of daylight; nevertheless, I couldn’t believe how limiting it was to not have easily available light at the flick of a switch. This was especially noticeable in the evening when it began to get dark: flickering candlelight is not a great substitute for daylight or electric light when it comes to reading a book or playing a board game. Any task, from cleaning dishes to getting ready for bed to locking up the house, were all much more difficult without light. And this was midsummer. Obviously, in those ancient cultures, and especially during the season of limited daylight, a source of light was precious! And of course, in ancient times, as now, fire provides light, yes. But fire requires fuel, doesn’t it? We’re talking about candles or oil lamps or wood, all of which were also not that easily come by in a country that was essentially barren desert. And that type of light must be continually created, stoked, maintained, and supervised. It was, literally, a much darker world in the era when Jesus declared, “you are the light of the world.”

So, we've established that Jesus is describing us as something rare, valuable, and wonderful: not just salt and light, ho-hum, as we think of them in 21st C. America, but salt! And light! Treasured and valued elements in the ancient world. And why were they so treasured, apart from their rarity?

Well, salt is an extraordinarily useful commodity, and it was, in fact, traded as an economic unit. Our word for "salary" comes from the word "salt". Salt was and is used as a disinfectant. Salt was and is used as a preservative. In a world without hand sanitizer and refrigeration, those two uses right there were crucial. Salt was and is a dietary necessity; the human body requires salt for survival. Put this together with salt's relative scarcity, and you have a treasure, indeed. Salt become a commodity of trade; wars were fought over access to salt; salt was used in sacred rituals, because of its value. And of course, then and now....salt enhances flavor. It brings out the zest of the food we put it on. I mean, really—what are corn on the cob or buttered popcorn without salt? Salt is so plentiful now that we get too much of it and it's gotten a bad rap, but my roasted cashews taste a whole lot better with salt. Salt is a treasure!

As is light. Life can't happen without light, in the most basic sense of reality. Without light, there would be no life as we know it. But even apart from that, light allows us to see, to read, enjoy color, to create beauty, to navigate through the dark. The right lighting is sometimes absolutely crucial, in painting or photography or displaying some rare and lovely item. The light from the light houses along our North Shore provide safety for boats out on the vast, dark or foggy waters, as well as iconic images of beauty and safe harbor. When I turn on my gas fireplace, which I do very often these days, I revel both in the warmth and the light that are produced. And when I sit and do

evening devotions by candlelight, there's a mesmerizing beauty to the flickering, dancing flame of light. Light is a treasure, too!

Jesus, then, is giving high praise indeed when he describes us as salt and light. And *describing* us is what he does. He's not *commanding* us, he's not giving us new laws or regulations. He doesn't say, "You should be salt. You should be out in the world preserving and enhancing and adding zest. (So, go and be salty!)" He doesn't say, "You should be light. You should be out in the world bringing brightness and cheer and clarity. (So, get out there and shine!)" Jesus doesn't state these passages in the form of shoulds or musts. Instead, he uses these words descriptively: he tells us what we *already are*. You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. We can't always tell it's true; it's not what we see when we look in the mirror, and we don't necessarily feel zesty or bright, but we are. When we are as God created us to be, we bring seasoning and light to the world around us. So, Jesus doesn't ask us to be something we're *not*, rather he asks us to be precisely whom we were meant to be. And what he does ask us to do is not to *quench* that reality of who we are: he asks that we not hide our light under a bushel or throw our saltiness carelessly away.

So, to return to my initial questions: yes, we believe in Jesus. But do we believe what he says about us? And do we believe that Jesus believes in us? Do we actually lay claim to being salt and light? Or are we pretty sure Jesus is confusing us with someone else when he says this? I have to admit that last week was kind of a dull blur to me, because I had a nasty head cold. Did I really bring flavor or zest to anyone or anything last week? Did I really brighten someone's life or load? My initial reaction would be doubt; no, Jesus, you're thinking about someone else, not me. I was a lot more like dull

and gray than salt and light last week. And maybe *you also* too quickly dismiss this reality of who you are in Christ: salt and light. But, I'd challenge both all of you and me to reconsider. With a little thought, I imagine we could come up with numerous ways we brought zest and brightness to those around us this past week. Did you make any jokes? Did you give any compliments? Did you ever break into a dance step or a snatch of song? Did you share a hug? Did you volunteer at the food shelf? Or contact a legislator? Or recycle plastic? Or carry in the groceries for someone? Or hold the store door open for a stranger and give a smile? I really do think we'd discover that, perhaps unknown to ourselves, Jesus is right: we are salt and light. Jesus believes in us: and what he says about us is believable, too.

And here is a particular slant to salt and light which came up at our weekly clergy text study, which I think is very applicable to current times. One of the pastors there, who has a science background, pointed out that both salt and light are curative; they have antiseptic qualities; they combat disease. I was somewhat aware of that in relation to salt. Salt has been used as a cleanser and disinfectant since time immemorial; just this last week, some were urging me to consider using a neti pot for my congested nose, which is essentially a saline solution to cleanse and disinfect. But, I didn't know this about *light*; it can also be used to combat disease: many municipalities now use UV light to kill pathogens in water, rather than filters. It's more effective. So, salt and light not only flavor and brighten; they have healing, curative properties when it comes to disease.

And disease---which breaks down into two words, of course: dis and ease, is a good description of our times, is it not? We are not at ease. We are experiencing disease in our national politics and world. So much so, that many of us feel overwhelmed

and distressed. But take heart: because simply being who we *are*---salt and light---can be a part of the way God brings healing and mercy to a dis-eased world. How might that work?

Bishop Tom Aitkin, our Synodical bishop, sent out this pastoral letter this last Thursday to be shared with congregations in our Synod. He sent it in response to national policies regarding closing down immigration and refugee resettlement for some, but his words certainly have a broader application. He wrote: “I speak to you as your Bishop in strong, encouraging, and gospel terms. Jesus Christ has claimed you. Be bold in doing what is good and right. In times like we are experiencing today Christians do what we are always called to do: *hear the Gospel and proclaim God’s love in Christ. *Love our neighbor, as defined by our Lord, this means anyone who needs our help. *Welcome the stranger, give them food and drink, clothing and shelter. *Be courageous, stand up against oppression and injustice, because Christ lives in you! *Take care of the widow and orphan, stranger and alien. *Bear witness to the incredible depth of God’s love for all people—no exceptions!” He concludes, “You belong to Jesus. That’s your ultimate status. Jesus doesn’t simply call you to follow him, he empowers you to do it. You are precious to God and to God’s work in the world. Step faithfully into it! Bishop Thomas Aitken.”

We *are* precious to God. We *are* treasure! We are salt! We are light! We bring zest and preservative powers. We brighten and enlighten. And we are part of the healing process that God seeks to work in this world; we combat the dis-ease of our times by being salt and light, both curative elements.

We believe in Jesus. But do we believe what Jesus says about us? Do we believe that Jesus believes in us? He does! You are the salt of the earth. Be it. You are the light of the world. Be it. Salt and light. Amen.