

Mt. 5, salt and light, Feb. 2020

Not surprisingly, we often talk about God in Church, and specifically, about God as revealed in Christ. We are, after all, Christians, or Christ-followers. And when we focus on Christ, we usually reflect on either who he was, or on what he did, or on what he *said*. Today, with our passage being a part of the famed Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, we are focusing on what Christ said. I would suggest that generally we can divide what Christ said, his words, into several categories, all of which are present in this Sermon on the Mount. The categories I suggest are words we like and are glad Jesus said---words like Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Those beatitudes, or blessed ones were in the verses immediately preceding this morning's text. We like those. A second category would be words we don't like and wish he hadn't said. We'll have those kind of words in next Sunday's lesson, where Jesus tells us that being angry is as bad as committing murder, and that lust is as serious as adultery. We wish he didn't say things like that. Finally, a third category of Christ's words might be this one: words we don't believe. Jesus says things that we internally, at least, probably don't really believe sometimes. And I will further suggest that some of *those* kind of words are in today's Gospel lesson, words we rather doubt, if we are honest with ourselves. Because in today's lesson, Jesus describes *us*. You know how disconcerting it is when someone describes you in such a way that you find yourself thinking that they must be confusing you with someone else? That's the reality today between Jesus and us. Because Jesus describes us as salt and light in today's Gospel lesson. He baldly states, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world". Notice he doesn't say, You

should or will someday be the salt, or you *should or will someday* be the light. He says, You *are* those things right now. Salt and light. And I frankly find that a little hard to believe, even if Jesus says it. You looked in the mirror this morning, presumably, as did I. Did you see salt and light looking back at you? I saw the same old, same old looking back at me. It's tough to believe Jesus when he claims we are salt and light. Could he be confusing us with someone else? Are we really salt and light? And what would it mean if we were?

Salt and light are elemental, terribly ancient, and also immediately contemporary. You've likely already experienced both this morning. Even if instead of salting an egg, you had cereal or toast for breakfast this morning, they contain salt. And no doubt you turned on electric lights as you got up and got ready. 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 snow at the moment. We absolutely take salt for granted, which is a hugely different perspective than that of Jesus' time and world. In the ancient world, salt was precious, rare, and indispensable. To have salt readily available is a recent luxury. Salt then was a treasure. *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.

Likewise, with light. Light is ours at the flick of a switch; or if you have a Google home, at the whim of your command. “Hey Google”, Phil and I say, “turn on the living room lamp”, and there is light. It’s a momentary powerful feeling. Obviously, in ancient cultures, and especially during their season of limited daylight, this was not the case.

Light was precious and resulted from either sunlight or fire. With sunlight or the lack of it being out of our control, that left only fire within our control, and even fire requires fuel. 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 dessert. 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 may 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. 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. Which is why these words fall into that category of words we may find hard to believe. Again, he isn't telling us what we *should* or maybe someday *will* be; he tells us what we *already are*. You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. And that's maybe not what we saw reflected back at us in our mirrors this morning, but if we take the leap of faith to believe Jesus-- it is true. True, even if we don't feel it. We may not feel zesty. We may not feel 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.

Here, then, is what I find challenging about these words; believing them! Laying claim to them! And finding encouragement in them. If your week was like my week, this could be hard to do. I felt used up and low energy and not like I was bringing any seasoning or brightness to much of anyone or anything. His words just don't seem credible. 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 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 what is so encouraging about this reality about us, if we are able to believe and claim it; a little goes a long way with both salt and light. Even just a shake or two of salt brings out the flavor. And a single candle flame can be seen in darkness as far away as a mile and a half. Which I think means that if there wasn't anything in the way, you could stand on a dark night with a single candle on the church steps and the flame could be seen by someone standing on Knife Island. Isn't that remarkable? So, if you feel like your light is a bit dim, or your salt supply a bit scant, it doesn't matter; a little

goes a long way. Especially when God is involved in the multiplication process. Don't let yourself become discouraged. Don't just give up. What I hear Jesus telling us is this: don't fret if your light is less than blinding and your seasoning isn't as zesty as it might be; shine anyways. Season anyways. A little goes a long way. Just be that salt and light that you are and God will use it to bless the world.

I cherish these words that Bishop Tom Aitkin, our Synodical bishop, sent out in a pastoral letter a ways back. 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!

We *are* precious to God. We are salt! We are light! We bring zest and preservative powers. We brighten and enlighten. Believe it! Believe what Jesus says about us, claim His words and be encouraged. You are the salt of the earth. Believe it and be it. You are the light of the world. Believe it and be it. Salt and light. That's us! Amen.

