

Salt and Light

By
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from the pulpit of
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February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:3-4, 6-9, 12

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and

the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

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 under foot.

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. Two ingredients so much a part of our daily existence we hardly think about them. Most of us don't think about salt too much unless the doctor has told you to reduce your intake. And light... we trust the sun to rise and set and rise again, and with a flip of a switch we have light whenever and wherever we need it. *You are the salt of the earth*, Jesus says, and yet we have assimilated this uncommon saying into such a common turn of phrase. We describe the simple goodness of others saying things like, "I can't wait for you to meet these friends of ours – they are just the salt of the earth,"

However, when Jesus says emphatically, *you are the salt of the earth* let's think more deeply about what being salt signifies. We know that salt has many purposes – to flavor food, create traction on icy roads and it can serve as an antiseptic in wounds. But when Jesus tells his disciples to "be salt" he is drawing on a number of Old Testament uses for salt. Look up *salt* in the Bible, and you will discover that salt was used for seasoning food. It was also used in court to ratify covenants and used by priests in worship as a symbol of purification. To eat salt with someone signified a bond of loyalty and friendship. In rabbinic metaphorical language salt connoted wisdom. One might not think there would be so much to learn about salt, but apparently there is.

Mark Kulansky wrote a book entitled *Salt: A World History* by tracing how wars were won and lost on the basis of who controlled stores of salt. So necessary for the preservation of food, governors of empires found salt to be a lucrative means of raising money by controlling and taxing it. Indeed, salt was often a currency of commerce. As a matter of fact, workers had to be paid enough that they could buy salt; hence the word *salary* derives its meaning from the Latin root for salt. So, when you get your paycheck or draw from your retirement fund, be grateful you have enough money to buy salt, and maybe that will help you remember salt's deeper, more profound meaning when the word comes from the lips of Jesus.

Today salt is cheap, but in the time of Jesus it was valuable, precious, necessary to preserve food and thereby provide for human welfare and its medicinal properties for healing. When Jesus says *you are "the salt of the earth*, what he is saying is you are valuable, you are precious and necessary for human welfare and healing. This mineral, mined of the earth and collected from the seas is vital to every living thing. That's who you are, Jesus tells us.

So if salt is the earth-bound, life-giving part of our nature; what is light? Throughout the Bible, light is almost always associated with the presence of God. At the beginning, on the first day of creation, God said, *Let there be light*. At the end, in the Book of Revelation, John saw that the city had no need of sun or moon to shine, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp the Lamb of God. And in almost every reference between Genesis and Revelation, light reveals the presence of God. Throughout the Psalms, you know, and everywhere in the prophets we find references to God as our Light and Salvation, a light to those who sit in darkness, and the word of God a lamp and light unto our path. According to Isaiah in our reading this morning: When we lose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry and house the homeless poor, the prophet says our light will break forth like the dawn.

Therefore, when Jesus says, you are the light of the world, he is saying you are of God, you are bearers of God's light, God's love, God's justice, mercy, and peace. And when Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth, he is saying you are valuable, precious, necessary; you are essential to the life of others. Imagine, just imagine what our world would look like today, if every day we consciously saw in the mirror This reflection of God's light in our faces. Imagine, just imagine what our world would look like if we saw in one another the precious, valuable, essential nature of salt. I am inclined to think that fewer people would be beaten to death in our city streets by those whose job is to keep us safe Fewer people would be separated out and cast off by the color of their skin. Fewer people would try to address their lonely isolation by

plowing down a mass of strangers with an assault rifle in a school, or grocery store or festival gathering. If everyone measured human worth by what Jesus is saying when he calls us Salt and Light, perhaps fewer people would be suffering from tragically low self-esteem and despair.

Just last month the National Bureau of Economic Research published a paper entitled “Deaths of Despair and the Decline of American Religion.” Co-authored by scholars from Wellesley, Ohio State and Notre Dame, the paper uses a wide range of research that correlates the decline in institutional religion with rising rates of “deaths of despair” – deaths to drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, and a rapidly escalating rate of suicide. The research shows that the social factors of organized religion can play an important role in addressing the crisis of increasing deaths of despair. They write: “The impact that we witness seems to be driven by the decline in formal religious participation rather than in belief or personal activities like prayer. These results underscore the importance of cultural institutions such as religious establishments in promoting well-being.”¹ In other words, those “Spiritual but not Religious” folks we read about are not getting the health and mental health benefits of a community where we worship and work together as Salt and Light.

David French, commenting on this research for *The Atlantic*, wrote: “The authors reject single causal explanations for deaths of despair. Of course, there are many reasons people slide into addiction or take their own life. But it’s not remotely surprising to me,” French says, “that despair can be tied to declining church attendance. “It’s hard to think of an institution that can better provide hope and purpose than a well-functioning church.” The lessons of the church, he adds provide “a combination of eternal and temporal assurance of God’s loving nature.

¹ OPIATES OF THE MASSES? DEATHS OF DESPAIR AND THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN RELIGION Tyler Giles Daniel M. Hungerman Tamar Ostrom Working Paper 30840 <http://www.nber.org/papers/w30840> NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH 1050 Massachusetts Avenue Cambridge, MA 0213.

That doesn't mean Christianity can't be incredibly demanding, but a demanding life is a purposeful life... In a good church, synagogue, or mosque, there is a place for every kind of person, a role for each member of the community... in a symphony of service... If we love and serve our neighbors," he concludes, "we can do something tangible to repair our national fabric, and perhaps even help save the lives of lonely - and despairing - people all around us." ²

Now, you could argue that I am preaching to the choir, so to speak, talking about the value of the church to people who are inside the sanctuary in this moment. But I also happen to know that many of us in here are in deep despair over what's going on in our country and our world, and we often leave and head out to our daily routines without knowing how to shine God's light in a broken world so full of violence and cruelty and fear mongering. There's a lot of pressure on us to take sides, to stay in entrenched clubs with like-minded people, to hold the overwhelming problems at bay. However, we are called by Christ – not to retreat but to shine God's light so that others are drawn to it.

Last November, there was a story in the news about a seventh grader in Buffalo, New York, named Romello Early, who watched with distress as one of his classmates, Melvin Anderson, was picked on because of the shoes he was wearing. In middle school, having expensive sneakers is often a status symbol, and as one teacher noted, "You go to school, and people look at your shoes before they even look at your face." Like a lot of other pressures we endure, it should not be that way, but often it is. Melvin was being teased for wearing worn-out shoes, and as he lamented, "It feels bad." How many times have we heard stories about the effects of this sort of bullying behavior? And when we put up with bullying behavior in the top echelons of political and cultural life, how do we expect 12-year-olds not to engage in

² David French, "Can More Church Heal What Ails the Lonely Heart?" *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2023.

demeaning forms of teasing? How often does such bullying lead to something much worse? But Romello Early decided to put an end to it.

Deeply bothered by seeing Melvin being bullied this way, Romello came home and told his mother, “Mom, you can take away anything you’re getting me for Christmas, or you could take my allowance, I just want to get Melvin some shoes.” So, Romello worked with his mother to pull together \$135, basically his life savings, so they could get Melvin some new shoes. With the wisdom of A salty light bearing child, Romello said, “Nobody deserves to get put down based on a pair of shoes that he’s going to eventually grow out of.” He went on to say that his next goal is to convince his fellow classmates that shoes were made for walking, not dividing, and diminishing. One pair of shoes broke the cycle of bullying that so often escalates to something much worse. One pair of shoes that lifted Melvin from the far end of bullying to a place of fuller humanity among his peers, all through the care of a 12-year-old who values human community more than his own Christmas gifts or any money he had saved. Their teacher is confident Romello’s kind actions are becoming contagious among his peers.³

Salt and Light. Valuable, precious, necessary; we are essential to the life of others, Jesus says. You are the light of the world, when we lose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry and house the homeless poor, our light will break forth like the dawn. wherever you are, let your light shine.

AMEN.

³ “12-year-old boy buys bullied classmate brand new sneakers,” online at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/12-year-old-boy-buys-bullied-classmate-brand-new-sneakers-buffalo-new-york/> 11/18/22.