

“SALT AND LIGHT”

Matthew 5:13-20 Feb. 5, 2017

Today’s lesson is at the end of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (a parallel of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain). Jesus is being followed by a crowd who are seeking healing for themselves or someone dear whom they have brought along. Seeing this, Jesus sits down with his disciples around him and begins to teach.

He starts by flipping the definition of “blessed” upside-down. John Calvin was not the first to say that those who are blessed by God with the hope of eternity can be identified by the ease of life which they enjoy here on earth. High position, wealth, authority—all of these are signs that this person has found favor with God. In reverse, the poor are poor because they are *predestined* to be poor (or thieves or liars, or violent) and fail to live eternally in heaven.

In this sermon, however, Jesus says that those who are “poor in spirit” will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Likewise, those who mourn, those who are humble, those who constantly beg for righteousness, are all *blessed*. They have it hard here, but they are destined to be comforted, to inherit the earth, to see what they beg God for come to pass. Even more, those people who are considered “soft” will also be blessed; those who are merciful rather than judgmental; those who are pure of heart (we might say “naïve”); those who always try to reconcile those who are fighting; those who are mocked for being careful to never do what God disapproves of; all will be rewarded for being as they are.

And then, Jesus talks about his followers being like salt and light in the world.

Salt never stops being salt. If we pour huge amounts of salt into water, the water will become salty. If we want to preserve vegetables and fish, we put them into a brine of vinegar and salt. Leave the tablespoon of salt out of a bread

recipe that makes four loaves, and you will notice the flatness as soon as you take a bite. Salt is essential to life.

In Jesus' day ovens would have salt piled up on the bottom to catch drippings so that they wouldn't flare up, as well as to lend flavor. Formed loaves of bread would be laid on the salt, so the crust would be crisp all over. Some have said that perhaps what Jesus meant by the salt loving its saltiness referred to that salt bottom. When it is soaked with fat and no longer removes the smells of past meals, it might be thrown out onto the street to keep weeds under control.

Because nothing can take the saltiness out of salt crystals, salt has long been considered holy. Baptismal water in some churches has a pinch of salt thrown in, making it holy, and thereby blessing the baptized. Salt can also bleach out wine stains, kill mold and fungi (that's why you don't put the yeast into bread until the salt is either stirred into the flour or dissolved in hot water). In some places, newborns are rubbed with salt soon after birth to remove the blood and dirt from them, especially where clean water is not available, in an attempt to keep them from getting sick. Rubbing salt into a wound, painful as it is, will in fact check infection if put on soon enough and rubbed into the torn flesh.

In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi sent a letter to the British Viceroy, who was the ruler of India according to the British empire, asking him to start the process by which India would be allowed to rule itself. In it he told the Viceroy, "If my letter makes no appeal to your heart, on the eleventh day of this month I shall proceed with such coworkers of the Ashram as I can take to disregard the provisions of the Salt Laws. I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from a poor man's standpoint. As the independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land, the beginning will be made with this evil."

The Viceroy refused his request to do away with the Salt Tax, and so on March 12, 1930, Gandhi and 78 of his male followers began the 240-mile march to the sea. By the time he and his followers got there, thousands were following his progress, and a large crowd gathered at the seaside to hear what he had to say.

What he had to say was essentially this: salt is essential for life, especially in hot climates, and temperatures in the south of India can go as high as 120 degrees in mid-day. Salt is used not only in the diet, but as a preservative—where people have no electricity, foods need to be dried with salt or pickled (which involves immersing the food item in brine, a salt and vinegar formula) for future use. The British, however, had cornered the market on salt, imposing a tax on every bit of salt made. This tax made salt too expensive for the poorest of the poor, and thus handed down a death sentence on those people. Therefore, what Gandhi did next was illegal: He picked up a bit of salt and powdered it between his fingers. In other words, he had “made salt” in defiance of the Salt Tax law. The British were waiting, and he was arrested and jailed. His actions were considered contrary to the “public peace.”

Did the Viceroy know that the poor could not afford the tax on salt? Perhaps not, though the thousands of people who sat on the sidewalks begging might have been a clue. But they used phrases every day that reflect the importance of salt.

A man is “worth his salt” if he does a good job. The very word “salary” is from the Latin for “salt,” a reflection of the fact that part of a Roman soldier’s pay was in the form of salt. When marching in the hot Mediterranean world, a man sweats heavily under all the armor with a pack on his back. It is necessary to replace the salt lost through sweat.

A person is said to be “below the salt” if his or her status seats them closer to the foot of the table than where the salt is placed. The higher-status folks are seated toward the host’s end of the table and get first dibs on the salt. Those “below the salt” must wait their turn and take the chance that those above will not use it all.

The phrase “the salt of the earth” is not original with Jesus. A generous and dependable person has been known by this phrase for millennia. On the other hand, the words of someone who is undependable are “taken with a grain of salt.” Salt has been used from ancient times in marking those who are dedicated to God and/or the service of God.

So, yes, the British surely knew, when they add the Salt Tax, that they would make a good deal of money from it, because everyone everywhere needs salt every day. The hotter the climate and the harder one works, the more salt is needed. As for the burden on the poor of India, this is how empires keep their underlings “in order” by “preserving the peace” (no pun intended). So rather than give in on this one tax law, they arrested Gandhi and jailed him. They had not counted on the backlash that would occur. Across India, riots broke out, violence reigned (on both sides) and eventually—over a decade later—the British finally relinquished India to self-rule. This is another power of salt, unforeseen at the time.

“You are the light of the world.” We live in a world so light-polluted that We can no longer see more than a few stars at night in populated areas. But in Jesus’ time, nighttime was *dark*—when there was no moon, it was easy to stumble and fall, or to be set upon by thieves, who could hide in the shadows and jump out without warning. If you were well-off and wanted to go outside, you had servants who could carry lighted lamps ahead of and behind you so that you could see the

way. But if you were poor, nighttime was the time for sleep and not much else.

We have all had the experience of Christmas Eve candlelight services. It is amazing that no matter the size of the church or chapel, when we put out the lights and light just one candle, we can see the whole sanctuary, Jesus tells us that we are to be the light that allows people to *see* the good in the world despite whatever darkness may be threatening.

Like a city on a hill, visible from afar, the way we behave ought to draw others to follow our example. Are we grumpy, critical, rude, insensitive? Then we will invoke those same attitudes in those around us. Are we courteous, holding doors open for others? Do we pause as we greet each other, or ask “How are you?” and keep on walking? Do we compliment the people we live with, or only criticize? Do we thank each other for the work we do to keep our home clean and nice-looking, to bring home or cook supper, to go the extra mile to help one another? It’s amazing the difference we make with our words and attitudes.

When we become people of salt and light, whatever we do preserves and purifies and points in the right direction. How do we become people of salt and light? By allowing God to fill our inner being, by accepting his light into the darkest areas of ourselves, by absorbing Christ and all that he stands for. By giving God time and space, by listening for God’s response to us, by allowing God to develop within us habits of generosity and love and deep honesty, and the courage to stand up for truth and integrity and love, no matter what persecution the world may heap upon us. And when all that begins to happen within us through God’s grace, the we don’t have to do anything, for we can’t help but be light and salt in a dark and desperate world, whether we know it or not.

We no longer salt our food to preserve it, or salt our wounds to purify them. But we must be salt and light in the world today if we want to be Kingdom people. With God’s help, let it be so. Amen and amen.