

Salty & Bright

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on the 5th Sunday of Eastertide

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 29, 2018

Text: Matthew 5:13-16

Salt is a funny thing. We salt our food and we salt our driveways and sidewalks during icy storms in winter. Too much salt on the roadways and sidewalks is bad for the environment we know but we have to do something to increase our safety during icy conditions. Too much salt in our bodies is bad too, contributing to a whole range of health problems not the least of which is high blood pressure. I'm guessing we have more than a few people here this morning who have to watch their salt intake for this very reason. And let's be honest and admit this is way more difficult than it should be simply because salt also tastes good. It adds a lot of flavor to our food. And there are now all kinds of salt for us to choose from in this regard – sea salt, iodized salt, non-iodized salt, garlic salt, onion salt, pink salt, Himalayan salt and so on and so on. Salt is indeed an enigmatic presence in our lives, both good and bad at one and the same time.

That's why for most of us in these contemporary moments when read this particular verse in Matthew from the Sermon on the Mount it's sort of confusing – “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”

Salt of the earth? Me? What does that even mean? Well, some of us of a certain age will recall when folks described as the salt of the earth generally meant they were simple, forthright and even righteous people who were also completely unassuming. They did the right thing simply because it was the right thing to do. We don't hear that phrase too much anymore, so we have to wonder what does it mean when Jesus describes you and me as the salt of the earth? To answer this question, we need to understand the significance of salt to daily life in Jesus' time rather than our own.

When Jesus used this metaphor in the Sermon on the Mount he knew exactly what he was saying. In his time, salt was a necessary, even vital element of daily life. It was used as a food flavoring and as a preservative in the days long before refrigeration. It was also used for cleansing of wounds and healing for some forms of illness in the days before antiseptics. It was also a central element in a number of religious rituals, within the Judaism of Jesus' time. For example, it was used for the ritual purification of meat according to the rules of the Torah. It was also a key element in some sacrifices in the Temple where it was used as a means of sealing the covenants between God and the people being sanctified in the Temple. As such it was symbolic of the necessary relationship between God and the Jewish people embedded as it was in so many aspects of daily life. Given all this, Jesus' reference to the salt of the earth takes on new meaning.

“You are the salt of the earth” is how he begins this paragraph. You are essential to life itself, he says, offering flavoring and preservation, healing and well-being. “Who me?” we think. Yes, you, Jesus says. As one who loves God and attempts to live life grounded in the reality of that love each day, you are the salt of the earth. How could you not be? Jesus doesn’t stop there though. He continues, “if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” That, dear friends, is an excellent question! What he’s really asking is how you handle it when you’re just beaten down and beaten back by the challenges and disappointments and difficulties which are all too common in our lives each day? What he’s really saying is that he needs us to be salty, but he is well aware that sometimes what happens to us in life each day can make that feel down right impossible. And notice, he doesn’t answer his own question. He just leaves it there, hanging, waiting for us to consider and respond. But, all too often, we got nothing, to quote the common vernacular.

And while we’re all still waiting for an answer to that question Jesus is already moving on to his next metaphor – light. “You are the light of the world,” he proclaims. Not only that, he explains, you are so much the light of the world that you are like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Again we think, “who, me?” I don’t feel like the light of the world. Most of time I feel like I have no idea where I’m going or what I’m doing or supposed to do

in the next day or two. How can I possibly be a light of the world so bright I'm like a shining city on a hill? That doesn't make any sense at all. This time, though, Jesus does continue on to provide at least a little more clarification on what he's thinking. He seems to acknowledge those moments we are feeling less than shiny and bright when he acknowledges that too often we are content to keep our light hidden, under a bushel basket, when what we should be doing is letting its light brighten wherever we are in the moment. So, this light Jesus is sure we have inside us, what is it? Simply put, it's the light of God's unconditional and abiding love for us just as we are. If we can know and accept this incredible love, this grace, from God, then we internalize this love. At this point, it becomes so much a part of who we are, each day, that we literally radiate that light – the light of God's love – to everyone we know. This, Jesus explains, is exactly what God is expecting us to do: "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Let your light – this incredible, amazing, brilliant inner reality of God's presence in your life – let this light shine and in so doing, bring God's presence into the world for all the world to see.

Okay, we think. I can understand that. I'm not sure I can do it, but I understand it at least. But, what about that whole losing saltiness question? Jesus didn't answer that one. He just left it hanging there. Well, actually he did a little more about that. He

says that salt which is no longer salty is good for nothing more than to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Ouch! So if I feel like I've lost my saltiness, Jesus is saying I should just throw in the towel? I'm done? No! Jesus would never say anything like that to anyone. And in that reality is the clue to what he sees as the answer to the question, how can its saltiness be restored? Our saltiness – our zest for life and our willingness to be about God's work in the world – can become dormant, buried under all the woes and challenges which life each day brings. The key then to holding on to our saltiness would be to take care to preserve it with intentionality. And how do we do that?

I think Jesus would offer several suggestions and we can see them in what he himself did to preserve his saltiness. First, he always took time to pray and spend time connecting with God, his source of saltiness and light. In fact, he didn't just take time. He made time. He would regularly say to the disciples, you go ahead. I need some time by myself to pray. And he would go up on a mountain by himself or take a walk by himself or sometimes just find a place to sit and be. Even on the last night of his life, when he knew what would happen to him once he was arrested, he chose to go to a garden to pray, asking the disciples to come with only to have them fall asleep. Second, Jesus regularly shared what he knew of God with other people through his teachings and his healings. He didn't keep what he knew, what he experience of

God to himself. He shared it, first with the disciples, and then with bigger and bigger audiences. He shared what he knew even when he knew just doing that simple act of telling his own truth of loving and being loved by God would get him killed.

Third, Jesus regularly participated in the rituals and rites of the synagogue – his religious community. He taught there at times. He met with synagogue leaders, often times secretly because those leaders were afraid of what other people in the synagogue might think. But we know Jesus honored the rites and rituals of his faith because of stories in the Gospels – stories where he took Sabbath meals with friends or sent those he healed on to the Temple for the final acts of purification required to be performed by the High Priests. Jesus engaged in the Jewish ritual bathing when he was baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River as his ministry began. And, on the last night of his life, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples in the upper room. This sacred ritual which is a cornerstone of the Jewish faith recalling the Exodus from Egypt was the last communal act Jesus did with his disciples. And it's where our sacrament of Communion first came to light.

And so we come to another answer to Jesus' questions in this text – how is it that we hold on to our saltiness and our light? How is it that we find the reserves to be who it is God needs us to be? How is that we are able to live up to Jesus' expectations that

we be salt and light for all the world? Well, dear friends, Jesus himself showed us what to do because he did it first. He began his ministry – his active work in the world as God’s own Savior sent to us and for us – with the act of baptism. For Jesus, it was an act of ritual purification as he began God’s work in earnest. For us, baptism is the means by which we become part of the household of God, the community of the faithful, Jesus himself created during his years on earth. Through our baptisms we are connected to Jesus, to his life, death and resurrection, for all time. Through our baptisms we take our first steps on the pathway of faith through the long journey that is life.

And as we make that journey through life, take each step facing all that comes with it – joys and sorrows, challenges and successes, heartbreaks and miracles – our nourishment for the journey is found in the sacred food of the Communion Table. Bread of all kinds, of any kind, reminds us of our connection to Jesus and what he needs us to do so that God’s vision for the world becomes tangible and real in our lives each day. The juice, the new wine of unfermented fruit, reminds us of the price Jesus paid for the life of faith he lived. It reminds us of what life asks of us – facing down what terrifies us most, even death itself. So it is that the sacraments of this church, our church, are at the center of how we respond to Jesus’ call to us to be salty and bright. Baptism and Communion provide the way in to the Christian life

and the nourishment for the way forward through it. And what of the church? The church is where we come to be reminded of why it matters to be salty and bright, of how it is that God needs us to live each day as beacons of hope in a fragile world ever in danger of slipping into darkness. The church is where we come to practice how to be who it is Jesus needs us to be as his followers each day. The church is where we come to have our saltiness restored and our lights polished up a bit, ready to shine all the brighter for having taken the time to be here.

That's why I think it is so very appropriate that our adopted logo for this church is a lighthouse, presumably standing on a rocky shore as salt water waves crash around it. It proves that the our foremothers and forefathers in this church and our parent churches have long understood that Jesus invites us, needs us, to be salty and bright for the world outside our doors. It's not easy. It won't be easy but with Jesus' help, may we be up to the task, this day and always. Amen.