

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: The Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore MA
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Isa 58:1-9a, (9b-12), Mt 5:13-20

Prayer: Holy Friend, grant that our lives may indeed be salt that you created us to be, salt that adds to the flavor of life for those around us. By your Holy Spirit, grant that our lives may be like lighthouses that shine light to show the way for those struggling on the great seas of life. Shine the light of Christ through us this morning in my words and in our meditations that we may love as Jesus did and thereby point others to you. Amen.

[Thanks to sermons by the now deceased Pastor Edward F. Markquart, Grace Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington for ideas that I found helpful for this sermon.]

There are three words in Jesus' sermon on which I want us to focus: salt, light, and you. Notice the simplicity ... each a word with which everybody is familiar ... each a single syllable. No chance of confusion ... Jesus is going to basics.

Take those three words one at a time. Salt. Salt.

Everybody knows what salt is. It is the white, grainy stuff that we put on our food to make it taste good. These days we are told to use salt in moderation. We need to avoid having high blood pressure so be careful how much salt we use.

But salt is what gives foods the taste we seek. Jesus referred to salt that has lost its taste. Such spoiled salt is only good for throwing out the kitchen door. How does salt lose its taste? It can absorb moisture from the air or from steam coming off something else we are cooking. Watered down salt is worthless.

In addition, in ancient times, in Jesus' time, salt might have been collected from the Dead Sea. When such salt was exposed to moisture, the salt would dissolve and leave only the impurities (gypsum and magnesium, for example). The impurities would be white, powdery and tasteless.

In modern times, table salt often contains iodine and anti-caking agents. Over time, these additives can break down, causing the salt to lose its taste or taste "off."

If salt is stored near stuff that smells strong, the salt can absorb odors and flavors. That can make the salt taste like whatever that strong-smelling stuff was and taste less salty.

So, salt needs to be kept from being watered down. It needs to come from a pure source. And it needs to be kept away from stuff that might make it stink.

Alan Baughcum

When I wrote those sentences, all I could think about was Scripture. Don't water it down, take it from authentic texts inspired by the Holy Spirit, and do not contaminate it with stuff that doesn't belong in Scripture.

So also, with us. We are created salty by God. Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. Our salty lives are kept salty by the inspired Word of God, Holy Scripture. We need to pray and study and worship the authentic Scriptures.

That is how we are made to be salty and how we are to stay salty. Not watered down. Not contaminated. Salty.

Go back to that second word, light. Jesus says we are the light of the world. Jesus does not say that we should try to be the light of the world. Jesus says we ARE the light of the world.

Just like losing our saltiness, we can lose our light. We can lose our light by not letting it shine, by hiding it under a bushel basket. Just like in the movie, *The Christmas Story*, we need to put that leg light right in front of the living room window so that everybody passing by outside can see it.

Just that that song we learned to sing, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

"All over Baltimore, I'm going to let it shine. All over Baltimore, I'm going to let it shine."

Not "I have to let it shine" or "I ought to let it shine" or "I must let it shine." I AM going to let it shine." Not out of duty or the dreary oppression coming from the preacher telling us that we have to let it shine. Out of our joyful reception of the salvation that Jesus the Christ freely offers us, we respond with enthusiasm and with a smile on our face!! I am going to let it shine!!

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

And there is that third word, the word "you." Jesus was not talking to a special audience, a selected group of disciples, for example. Jesus had begun his ministry telling the people that the kingdom of heaven had come near and many, perhaps thousands, people gathered to hear Jesus speak from the mountainside. Jesus was talking to anyone and everyone who would come near enough to hear his words.

Jesus could have been talking to you and me. And, through the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is talking to you and me.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Marcia, Lynne, Terri, Lynn, Alan ... everyone here in this church today ... everyone hearing the words of Jesus as I am reading them to you ... Jesus is talking to each of us and to all of us.

Alan Baughcum

We are salt and light ... each of us and all of us.

Not just when we come to church on Sunday morning. When we go to work. When we go to the grocery store. When we go to the doctor, or to the movies, or when we go bowling. When we gather with our friends and family members to celebrate or to mourn or to cheer on our favorite sports teams. Go, Pats!!

Our light must be visible. Parents, grandparents, our light must be visible to our children and to our grandchildren.

More than that, our light must be visible to our friends, our co-workers, people we meet by accident or only occasionally. We must not hide it under a bushel basket. We must lift our light so it is visible and so that its rays extend as far as possible.

I am not talking about being a Bible-thumper, going around and pushing the Scriptures into people's faces. Occasionally that may be useful ... I have a sweatshirt with big letters on the front, "Y'all need Jesus." I don't wear that everywhere, but I have worn it in the pulpit a couple of times when I thought it was appropriate. But we don't need to wear a lot of explicitly religious clothes or crosses or piercings.

But neither am I talking about living our lives so that people do not know that we are Christians. There are unchurched people out there in Baltimore and in Dublin and in Columbus. They are watching us. And in fact the only thing they might ever know about being a Christian will come from us. We are the face of our Savior to them. Our lives tell them what Jesus preached. Our words and behavior may be the only evidence they have of what Christian love looks like.

So, when it is time for the preacher to preach at your funeral, do not let the best thing to be said about you is that you were a good guy or a nice lady. Somewhere in that eulogy let us make sure that the preacher acknowledges that we worked to be a good servant of our Savior and that, on Christ's behalf, we were salty and full of light in this world.

Nice words, preacher, but as a practical matter, what are we supposed to do with this sermon about being salt and light?

Jesus has a lot to say about that in the rest of his Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus' words have their roots in what was said hundreds of years earlier by Isaiah in the Old Testament reading for today. Consider just a few of Isaiah's admonitions.

Stop oppressing those who work ... that can mean a lot of things ... a labor union organizer might want to speak about obstacles in the law or in societal norms to workers' forming labor unions to protect their economic and health and safety well-being ... an employer might want to complain about labor union practices that make business operations so inefficient that the firm might have to declare bankruptcy and close up shop. We can work for reconciliation.

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As an economist who can't seem to quit being an economist, I want to make changes in our educational systems that seem to be failing the children, particularly in American inner cities. Without a good education, it is impossible to get a good job. We need structural changes that allow parents and students the opportunity to find an education that suits the needs of our children. We can work to heal the educational wounds in our country. We can work for reconciliation with those left behind educationally.

Loose the bonds of injustice ... we have a long history of struggling to make sure that racial minorities, ethnic communities, women, native Americans have access to the good life that many of us enjoy in this country. We get rid of laws and societal norms that divide us arbitrarily and without scientific justification, that privilege one group's enjoyment of our rights as citizens and deny those privileges to other groups. We must work for reconciliation.

We desperately need to rethink what it means to be an American and how one can immigrate to this country and become an American. We have vacillated between policies that encourage open borders and policies that have closed our borders completely. Jesus told us to welcome the stranger, but he did not tell us to be so welcoming as to endanger the health and well-being of the welcoming community. We need to stop pointing the finger at one another and dedicate ourselves once and for all to developing sensible policies that incorporate Jesus' welcome and simultaneously preserve the communities and values that make such a welcome possible. We need to work for reconciliation.

And, then, two of Isaiah's prophecies that I am combining ... first, reconcile with all those in your family and community ... second, do not speak evil. We have just started a new year ... brand new ... mostly not messed up yet.

Suppose each of us resolved in the coming months to select a friend or a family member with whom we have had a falling out and try for a more loving relationship with that person. I am not advocating that someone who has been abused try on their own to reconcile with their abuser ... that might not be safe or possible. But, if there are folks in our lives who, because of some perceived slight on our part or their part, have become separated and distant, maybe we might try to restore or rebuild a new relationship. If an apology does that, why shouldn't we try? We need to work for reconciliation.

A final idea from Preacher Alan ... neither Isaiah or Jesus explicitly said it, but it seems to me consistent with being salt and light in the world. Smile.

If you don't smile, your face may freeze into a permanent frown!! You will be amazed at how friendlier a place the world is when you smile. People tend to smile back when you smile at them. It will improve your mood and the moods of those who work and live around you. There is nothing specifically Christian about smiling but it is really, really, hard to share the salt and light of Christ when you walk around looking miserable.

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You may not feel like smiling ... do it anyway. You will be surprised, especially when others smile back at you. It is amazing how much your mood will improve. You might get to the point where you actually feel like smiling!

Let us pray: Dear God, help us remember Jesus' words and be mindful of the salt and light we are called to be, the kind that adds zest to the lives of those around us. As did the ancients, let us be the salt and light that preserves God's covenant and the goodness of God's creation. Move us to be the kind of salt and light that lifts the darkness, and the kind that heals the wounds in the lives of hurting people in our communities and all around the world!

Amen.