

February 9, 2014 - 5th Sunday after Epiphany
San Marino Congregational United Church of Christ

2560 Huntington Drive, San Marino, California 91108-2214

(626) 292-2080 www.sanmarinoucc.org

Today's Text: **Matthew 5:13-20** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

You are the salt of the earth. But what if salt were to lose its flavor? How could you restore it? It would be fit for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. You don't build a city on a hill, then try to hide it, do you? You don't light a lamp, then put it under a bushel basket, do you? No, you set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before others so that they may see your good acts and give praise to your Abba God in heaven.

Don't think I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. The truth is, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the Law, not even the smallest part of a letter, will be done away with until it is all fulfilled. That's why whoever breaks the least significant of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever fulfills and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

I tell you, unless your sense of justice surpasses that of the religious scholars and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Exploring today's theme,
"Salt and Light"
with Pastor Donald Shenk

Salt (shake)
and light (burst).

Salt (taste)
and light (shield eyes).

Salt (shovel)
and light (squint to see).

As you can imagine, I've been thinking a lot about salt and light this week. The verses Cynthia read so beautifully from *The Inclusive Bible* come to us as another part of Christ's Sermon on the Mount – that extraordinary sermon that puts every preacher to shame with the idea that we can even call our meandering utterances, "sermons," and continues to edify, astound and perplex us all these years later. And so, to the beautiful beatitudes we read and explored last week, we now add these multi-faceted images of two seemingly ordinary elements and energies to enrich and enlighten our souls.

Scholars tell us that the Sermon on the Mount is actually made up of many teachings of Jesus that were probably not all delivered in one sermon or even on a mount. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church tells us that the same material (from this sermon) is scattered [about] when found in Luke; and in his "A Brief Introduction to the New Testament" Bart D. Ehrman states that, "The Sermon on the Mount

may be compared with the similar but more succinct Sermon on the Plain...which occurs at the same moment in Luke's narrative, but [has Jesus] giving the sermon on the way down [the mount] at a level spot. Whatever the setting, I have a feeling Jesus could read his audience better than any of us and knew when his listeners needed to get up and move as well as when they needed a break and some time to absorb.

Indeed, when I think of all that has been written JUST about Jesus' use of salt and light, I can't imagine that everyone that actually got to HEAR those words was absorbing their full meaning at the time.

Although she'd rather I not mention her by name, there is a certain teacher that helps me out with the LEAP of Faith Bible studies on Wednesdays and gave me a wealth of material on salt and light that I found fascinating and enlightening. It's funny that we had both found one commentary on salt in our separate research that stood out to us.

It comes from Rev. Neil Chappell's blog entry he calls "You Old Salty Sea Dog," and he actually found it in a lectionary resource for Catholics called "word-Sunday" wherein they set the context for this salt image, saying that at the time it "referred to the leveling agent for paddies made from animal manure, the fuel for outdoor ovens used in the time of Jesus. Young family members would form paddies with animal dung, mix in salt from a salt block, and [then] let the paddies dry in the sun. When the fuel paddies were lit in the oven, the mixed-in salt would help the paddies burn longer, with a more even heat. When the fuel was burnt out, the family would throw it out onto the road to harden a muddy surface."

Wow! You gotta love that one, don't you? As Rev. Neil mused on this use of salt he cautioned us not to hear Jesus calling us, God's children, dung(!), but rather as the salt, "the ones that help the fuel burn longer...and brighter" or as he mentions the "word-Sunday" expressed, "Jesus saw his followers as leveling agents in an impure world. Their example would keep the fire of faith alive even under stress. Their example would spread faith to those mired in the cultural 'dung'."

My first thought about salt was definitely different from the dung component, although I really like that take on it. But I also see Jesus encouraging us to be those who add spice to life. Jesus, I think is asking us to continually take up the Word of God and its righteous seasoning in our lives and use it as a flavoring agent that perks up and enhances everything and everybody with whom we come into contact.

If you cook, you know the difference salt can make to any dish. Too much and it's ruined, too little and it can be bland. We're back in balance territory, aren't we? Jesus calls us to not only know where to spread the good news, but to be thoughtful about it, understanding those with whom we are in relationship and those to whom we are speaking. To be a "good salt" in the world and not one that aids in hypertension and the rise in someone's blood pressure so that they want to have nothing to do with this salt or those who purvey it!

As an aside, I'll also mention that it's good to test your flavor now and then to make sure you're on the right track. Don't be like the Burnses and me who got confused by the beautiful ceramics at the Oldknow house while Vivi and Gerry were in England and added a nice heaping tablespoon of salt into a cup of coffee, thinking it was sugar! Of course, Daryl tried to get me to continue doing that whenever possible!

Nancy Rockwell in her essay on Salt and Light reminds us that salt is "essential to life, part of every cell in our bodies and part of the cells of all living things...a precious commodity left in the earth by seas long dead and gone. And we humans, who evolved from creatures in the sea, remember that connection in our need for salt." She goes on to note how "at great banquets, distinction was made between those who sat above and below the salt, a notable dish on the table. [And how] Orthodox churches include salt in the

baptismal liturgy, pouring some on the wet infant with the words, "May you be preserved for eternal life." I can imagine there are quite a few salty tears shed during this Orthodox ritual as well.

Commentator Anne Howard notes that, "Jesus' first listeners knew that salt was necessary for life," and points to a number of "references in the Hebrew Scriptures to salt's essential nature," including the prophet Elisha sprinkling salt into the spring at Jericho to purify the water as referenced in 2nd Kings, as well as a passage in Numbers where, "To eat salt with another person was a sign of loyalty...a breaking of bread, a sign of commonality."

As we hear Jesus speaking a little later in our text today, we know how well versed he was in the Torah and how much he was likely pulling on all of the ancient and profound references to salt to teach and encourage his listeners; letting them and all of us know that we ARE the salt of the earth and asking us to embody the qualities and symbolism of salt as not just hearers of the Word but doers. As we pick fruit for the needy, gather and serve food for the hungry and pray, visit and care for each other and all those we meet, I pray that Jesus sees us as a full and flavorful Salt Cellar here in San Marino!

What other ideas and images come to you as you think of salt? As so much of the rest of our country deals with copious amounts of snow and ice, we hear and see reports of how much salt is used on the highways and byways to try and make them safe for travel. Is THAT the kind of salt we are to be? Helping others to navigate the treacherous pathways of this world? I know there have been many people in my life that have acted as that kind of salt for me.

I saw one report this week where in one town back east they're afraid they'll run out of salt because they've had to use so much more of it this year than they have in the past. I couldn't help but think that God needs more salt, too. There are so many who need our God-salt qualities to help them along the roads we're all traveling these days.

And then... there's LIGHT! Oh man...

"You are the light of the world. You people come and follow me. If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what we were meant to do and be." Love that song.

Have you ever been in a truly dark place? It would be good as your pastor to know where your mind went just now... but what I'm asking at this moment is whether you've ever experienced extreme PHYSICAL darkness. You know, where you can't see your hand, even if it's right in front of your face. Yes? And then, what happens if in that moment of total darkness you manage to find one tiny little match and strike it and it bursts into flame? The darkness can't overcome it, can it? Light always wins.

Is that the light Jesus is asking us to be? A light that shines so brightly with hope and possibility? A light that has the ability to help not only us, but those around us to see what is actually there; a truth revealing light? Light that explodes suppositions and lays bare that which is authentic and true? Can we be the person in a room full of naysayers who risks our pride to say, "yes, we can?" Can we be the person who walks past our fear to confront the bully and shed the light of kindness and truth in a scary situation? Can we, as Anne Howard says, be "the ones who show up in the dark places of the world and light it up with the compassion of God?"

In her essay, "Be the Light," the Reverend Melissa Bane Sevier recalls one of her favorite sayings attributed to the ancient philosopher Confucius: "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness... There is much to complain or worry about in this world;" she writes..."much evil, confusion,

suffering... [But] No matter how small the candle we light, no matter how insignificant our positive action, it can have an effect."

...

This was a full and exhausting week for me and for many of you and especially for our dear sister, Sue, who underwent massive open-heart surgery on Wednesday. As I sat at the hospital reading essay after essay about salt and light and puzzled throughout the week over what I was going to say to you today, it was, as always, during my moments of meditation and quiet when I finally heard God speaking. Funny how that works, isn't it? ("I'm ALWAYS speaking," God says...)

I don't know about you... well, some of you I actually do... but I have a tendency to think that if I'm not working as hard as I can, doing everything I can to bring about the kingdom of God not only in this church, but in this city, this country, this world, this universe, I'm really just not worth my salt. You know?

And what did I hear God speaking to me in that still quiet time? You ARE the salt of the earth, my child. You ARE the light of the world. Yes, listen to my voice and go and do what I call you to do, but remember that it is not by your deeds or your work that you are my child, but by my grace.

Claim your saltiness. Claim your light. Taste and see these God qualities in others. Remind one another of how much each of us brings to this world and encourage one another to express these qualities boldly and without fear.

One of my favorite sayings is by the brilliant Marianne Williamson, and if you read the About Our Folks missive this week you saw it printed there at the top. I've carried this quote with me in my briefcase and I've told it to you before and will again. It was even quoted by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 inaugural speech, and it speaks to the salt and light I believe God sees us to be:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate." she says. "Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure....We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Amen? Amen!