

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, February 5, 2017)

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.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Salt and Light"**

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 Susan read so beautifully for us 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 Rev. Lorraine explored so meaningfully with us last week, we now add these multi-faceted images of two seemingly ordinary elements and energies to enrich and enlighten our souls.

As with many things in the gospels, Scholars tell us that the Sermon on the Mount here in Matthew 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 Bart D. Ehrman in his "A

Brief Introduction to the New Testament” 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.” Fascinating.

But whatever the setting, and no matter where it was given, I think the teachings issuing forth from Jesus here comprise some of the most relevant and pertinent part of our faith and continue to speak to us today.

Indeed, when we think of all that has been written JUST about Jesus' use of salt and light, we know these teachings are fundamental to our faith and why they are still so significant to us living in this crazy part of the 21st century.

The Rev. Neil Chappell's blog entry he calls “You Old Salty Sea Dog,” is a good starting place for us as we delve into the meaning of these two vital ingredients for our faith and time. For there he sets the context for this salt image, by writing that at the time Christ would have used it, salt would have “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. [Then,] when the fuel was burnt out, the family would throw it out onto the road to harden a muddy surface.”

I'm sure many of you have used salt in the same way! (not) However, as Rev. Neil mused on this use of salt he cautioned us not to hear Jesus calling us dung(!), but rather as, “the ones that help the fuel burn longer...and brighter.”

“Jesus,” he notes, “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’.”

What a wonderful image for us living today as many of us feel surrounded by cultural dung and wonder what our use could possibly be in this world at this time.

My first thought about salt was definitely different from the dung component, although I really like that take on it. I also see Jesus encouraging us with this salt image to be those who add spice to life. The Christ, I think is continually asking us to 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. Make a difference to your bland conversations – add salt. Spice up the discourse, sprinkle your goodness around. Season the world with kindness and with the news of God's grace.

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 or even tasteless.

Jesus calls us to not only know where to shake around 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 yours truly who, as Vivi reminded me at LEAP of Faith on Wednesday night, got confused by the beautiful ceramic containers at her house and added a nice heaping tablespoon of salt into a cup of coffee, thinking it was a sugar bowl and not a salt cellar.

Nancy Rockwell in her essay on Salt and Light reminds us that salt is “a precious commodity left in the earth by seas long dead and gone. [It's] essential to life, [and is] part of every cell in our bodies

and ... the cells of all living things. We humans, who evolved from creatures in the sea, remember that connection in our need for salt.”

“At great banquets,” she writes, “distinction was made between those who sat above and below the salt, a notable dish on the table. Orthodox churches include salt in the baptismal liturgy, pouring some on the wet infant with the words, “May you be preserved for eternal life.”

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 and make sandwiches for the needy, gather food and sundries for the homeless 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 right 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.

And then... there’s LIGHT! Oh YES!

(singing) “You are the light of the world. You people come and follow me...”

As I ride my bike home in the dark after some of my late nights here at the church before we spring ahead again in March, I’m very careful to be sure people can see me as they whiz past in their excessively speedy cars. On some stretches of road there are no street lights and the path before me seems rather dark and foreboding as my little bike light illumines only a small patch of road right in front of me. But then one of those speedy cars will come along and shine their bright lights on the path ahead of me and for a moment I can see all the way down the road and gauge what obstacles may be coming up.

Is that the kind of light God wants us to shine? The light of our lives that illumines the path for others so that they can see the beauty of living in God’s way and perhaps avoid some of the obstacles that would trip them up and send them flying? A light that has the ability to help not only us, but those around us to see what is actually there.

Or maybe we’re to be that tiny light that would seem to shine weakly, but the darker it gets the brighter it glows. Maybe this is our truth revealing light – a lamp that explodes suppositions and lays bare that which is authentic and true when the darkness presents its “alternate facts.” Is this the light Jesus calls us to be? The spark in a room full of naysayers who flames brightly despite the risks to say, “yes, we can?” Can we be the one who carries the torch through the darkness of 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, [and] suffering... [But] No matter how small the candle we light, no matter how insignificant our positive action, it can have an effect."

Claim your light. Claim your saltiness. 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. Season this world and light it up with what only YOU can bring to it.

In this time when the divide seems deep between what we believe and who we are in this country, I encourage you to add your salt and your light to that which you are hearing. Find a way that's right for you to speak out, show up and let others know that you are part of a movement that spreads kindness, radically welcomes and lavishly loves all of God's children.

I leave you with this short yet powerful blessing penned by John O'Donohue:

"May the light of your soul guide you. May the light of your soul bless the work you do with the secret love and warmth of your heart...May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light and renewal to those who work with you and to those who see and receive your work."

Amen.