

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 9, 2020)

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12 (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to Yahweh?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of Yahweh shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and Yahweh will answer; you shall cry for help, and Yahweh will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. Yahweh will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Text: Matthew 5:13-16 (*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.

Exploring with Pastor Donald Shenk: "Lightly Salted"

When I was looking through my notes on the texts before us today, I found a children's wondering time I did way back at the beginning of my ministry here, and I thought it would be fun to revisit it and see if it rekindles any memories or maybe just gives you some *NEW flavor* for thought on our theme for today.

[Displaying a salt shaker.] SO... do you know what this is? Yeah... Everyone knows about salt -- we use it every day to make our food taste better, don't we.

Can you imagine eating a hamburger and fries without salt? They would be pretty tasteless, wouldn't they?

What other foods do you like with salt?

Some of you may not know that making our food taste better is just one of many uses for salt. In fact, I read that salt is used in making over 14,000 different products. Here are just a few of the many uses of salt.

Let's see what in bag #1... *[A bright red shirt.]*

- Did you know that Salt is used in fixing the dye in fabrics like this pretty shirt. Without salt, the bright colors that we wear today would quickly wash out of our fabrics. What a dull place the world would be without salt!

Okay, so what's in bag 2?... *[A leather belt.]*

- How about leather? Did you know Salt is also used in making leather? Without salt we would not have many of the leather products that we use every day-- like this belt. This one comes all the way from Kenya in Africa.

And here's bag 3 – what do you think might be in it?... *[A plastic toy truck.]*

- Oh my goodness! A plastic toy?! Did you know that Salt is also used in the chemical industry to make plastics? Without salt, we might not have many of the toys or gadgets that we play with every day which are made from plastic. Now I'm not exactly sure this is a positive use of salt since it's really difficult for the earth to make plastic back into earth again. Maybe we should make all of our toys and gadgets out of only SALT instead...

So, you see, people have known about the usefulness of salt for many years. At one time, salt was so important that people were even paid with salt. Can you imagine that?

{Salt shaken into parishioner's hand.} "Here's your change!"

Since salt is so important, is it any wonder that Jesus told us that we were to be like salt to the world? Jesus said, "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

I wonder what Jesus meant by that...

How do we make ourselves known? What do others see when they look at our lives? What are the elements of a good life, a tasty life, a shiny life, a salty life?

Wikipedia tells us that being an old salt has the connotation of being an old story-telling sailor who is often quite the raconteur as he tells his sea stories, and that much of the history and traditions of mariners that is passed from generation to generation comes from the telling

and retelling of these stories by these old salts. Those stories may, of course, be truthful, or half-truths, or even falsehoods.

I imagine that's not quite what Jesus had in mind when he encouraged his followers to be the "salt of the earth."

And then there's the term "salty language" which probably derives a bit of its meaning from the old salts who are known to use earthy or crude language in the telling of their sea stories. Still not quite where I think Jesus was going with this element.

Being salty can also have an element of being piquant, or engagingly provocative. I think we could say Jesus himself was being quite salty when delivering the Sermon on the Mount, don't you think; pressing the people into thinking about their lives and the ways in which they serve God differently than the decidedly less-than-salty status quo among the religious elite.

Salt would have been highly prized as a commodity in the days when Jesus was moving about this earth in human form. The Jewish Encyclopedia tells us that "from earliest times salt was indispensable to the Israelites for flavoring food" and was "a most important necessity of life." They also had their own myriad meanings for salt as metaphor. In the book of Ezra, "eating the salt of a man" meant "to derive one's sustenance from him, to take pay from him or to be hired by him." And many saw salt as having healing properties, most likely derived from the story related in II Kings 19 where the prophet Elisha "heals" the poisonous spring near Jericho by throwing salt into it. Even more vital to the Israelites' understanding of salt was the place it had in the Temple service. In the rituals, or cult, of the Temple, and especially in its symbolic importance in the ceremony of the covenant, holy and inviolable obligations were designated as "salt covenants", "probably taken as an especially fitting symbol of the eternal duration of such a covenant." Even today, many in the Middle East will say "there is salt between us" as an expression of the promises they have made between them and the importance of such covenants.

So those gathered on the mount as well as those of us gathered here today, carry many meanings of what it is to be salt with us. How we interpret and, shall we say, TASTE those words for our own lives is of great importance in terms of what kinds of Christians we feel Christ is calling us to be.

Coming to us as the text with its images of salt and light does at this point in Christ's sermon, at least as Matthew outlines it for us, right after the beatitudes we read together last week, Jesus would seem to be saying that, unless we truly let our lives express and BE the blessings God calls us to do and be, we are but bland brothers and sisters, making no real difference in the world and certainly not flavoring God's kin-dom with our own special seasoning. Since if we don't add our own flavor to this beautiful casserole God is creating, we'll just end up with another hot dish on the potluck table, one that's getting colder and colder because nobody's even interested in trying that big hunk of tasteless guck.

Where in our lives could we bring more salt to the table that God sets for all of God's children? How can we stimulate one another, be they meek, or pure in heart or hungering and thirsting for righteousness without raising each other's blood pressure?

Is there a way we can actually let our saltiness dry up the slugs of sadness and despair that crawl through so many lives?

In our Hebrew Bible passage from Isaiah, the prophet is pretty salty himself, channeling God's voice to call out the people for going through the motions of religious observance and fealty to God's ways, but not paying attention to the meat of who God is and what God wants from our lives. In other words, they aren't adding any salt to that meat so that those who experience it will receive justice and flavorful food and lots of LIGHT!

Light also has many connotations. And how we understand the light and where we shine our light can also make a great difference to the world we live in as well as to our individual lives.

Light can reveal what is hidden and enable the truth to shine forth. A light can shine on a path and show us which way to go. Even the smallest light can pierce the darkness, whether it be physical darkness or spiritual darkness and bring hope and joy and understanding to any situation in our lives.

Isaiah sees the light as right action shining forth from our lives and bringing healing to our souls. "If you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday," he proclaims.

When we seek righteousness and justice for all, the parts of our lives that seemed dark and gloomy begin to shine and spread the light of God on others so that we may all bask in the light together.

Commentator Marcia Riggs writes that we may lose our "distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth...by forgetting that [we] are to disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers and courageously standing for what [we] believe." This is what it means to be the light in the world and to provide energy for that light by following and BEING the beatitudes as Jesus outlined them for us in the text last week.

When you think about it, we don't need a lot of salt to flavor something – even just a little bit will do. After all, we do have to remember to not use TOO much salt, or our blood pressure may rise. It also takes very little light to illuminate the darkness. Too much light and we're all blinded by it. As with everything in God's kin-dom, there's a balance and a way to be and use all the tools that God provides for our understanding and our way to live and be in this world.

O Holy and Haunting Presence
whose spirit moves quietly
but surely
in the sounds and fury of the world

and of my life,
you know me
as rushing water knows the rock
and releases its beauty
to reflect new light.

Open me
to the insistent abrasiveness of your grace,
for I often trivialize love
by abandoning the struggles
which accompany its joys
and rejecting the changes
which lead to its fulfillments.

Release me
from the dangerous illusions
of independence
when the human family summons me to the realities and promises of interdependence
among races, sexes, nations.

Release me
from being possessed
by riches I don't need
and grievances that weary me
when you call me to share
my very self
with neighbors,
to flavor your world with salt and
to reflect for the world
the light of your kin-dom
within me.

(stanzas adapted from
"Release Me from the Dark Fury" by Ted Loder)

Amen.