

A Sprinkle of Light, Salt

[Text - Matthew 5:13-20]

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I would guess that most of us here are familiar with the Stephen Schwartz musical *Godspell*. Many of you may know it because it's been revived several times since its 1971 premier. In my case, however, as a Church Camp counselor, college student, and seminarian of the 1970's, the words and music of *Godspell* have been permanently branded upon my brain. So, when I hear today's reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, what registers in my mind is this:

You are the light of the world!

You are the light of the world!

But if that light's under a bushel [burr],

It's lost something kind of crucial.

You've got to stay bright to be the light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth!

You are the salt of the earth!

But if that salt has lost it's flavor

It ain't got much in its favor.

You can't have that fault and be the salt of the earth.

So let your light so shine before men

Let your light so shine,

So that they might know some kindness again

We all need help to feel fine - let's have some wine!

[Now in all fairness, we had just come out of the psychedelic 60's, and were entering a new and even more groovy decade!]

I think it's fascinating, how simple words or phrases can instantly evoke a wide range of images, memories, and emotions from our past. When we listen to Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, we realize that he completely understands this. Rather than delivering an in-depth theological explanation about the importance of living an honorable and elevated life, Jesus simply says to his followers, "*You are the light of the world! You are the salt of the earth!*" For people living in a pre-Edison era, in a place where candles are a precious commodity, the stark difference between light and darkness is clearly comprehended and appreciated. So Jesus telling his followers that *they* are the light of the world, ignites and raises their spirits in a way that they will forever remember. And in a world where *salt* was often valued above *gold*, and is used to pay Roman soldiers for their military service, telling those people that they are the salt of the earth, is an extremely high and memorable complement. Jesus could definitely stir people's imaginations, and inspire their dedication, by using everyday objects or examples to trigger ideas and ideals that are already there, just below the surface. This morning, I'd like to try to do the same, by lifting-up some images and ideas about *salt*.

With last weekend's brief thaw, quite a few people eagerly lined-up at the Shell Car Wash back here, to get some of that road salt off their vehicles, before it could eat-away at the metal. It reminded me of a brief *Pillar* article I had written a few years ago, about some of the ways that *salt* is used. Of course, the fact that I was already thinking about Jesus' teaching, and "You are the salt of the earth" was playing incessantly in my head, also helped bring that article to mind. In it, I reflected on both the positive - and negative - properties that are found in that simple compound *salt*. Jesus himself, opens his remarks with an affirmation of the value of salt, and the high regard people have for those who are considered to be "salt of the earth" kind of folk. Yet he immediately rotates that positive expression, to reveal a

potentially distressing reality: “But if that salt has lost its flavor, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” It seems to me that Jesus is essentially saying, “Look, each of you, as my followers, have a critical role in making this world a better place. The example you set, the light you provide, is truly significant! Therefore, as representatives of *God*, you will either actively exemplify the abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace, or you will convey the message that God is somehow inadequate, insensitive, or just plain cruel!”

“*You are the salt of the earth!*” However, that simple compound does have several complex, and contradictory, qualities. For example, salt can be extremely helpful for our cars, melting snow and ice so we don’t slide off the road and cause serious damage. Yet that same salt can also be destructive, eating-away at our cars’ vulnerable spots; encrusting them with a corrosive crud that dulls their color and diminishes their shine. “*You are the salt of the earth!*”

Salt is used to season our food, to enhance its taste, and to help bring out the best possible flavor. Some say there’s nothing more bland than a salt-free diet. Nevertheless, if we overdo it, that same salt can completely overpower the taste, and ruin a perfectly good meal. And too *much* salt in our system can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, and other health concerns. Salt can be helpful or hindering, a blessing, or a bane. “*You are the salt of the earth!*”

For centuries, salt has been used as a preservative, keeping food from spoiling - and safe to eat - on long and difficult journeys. Yet salt can also destroy food, and entire food sources. For example, neither plant nor fish can survive in - or close to - Israel’s Salt Sea - also known as the *Dead Sea*! So salt can help preserve Life, or

it can be an extremely toxic presence. “You are the salt of the earth.”

Finally, salt can have a marvelous healing and soothing quality. I remember as a kid, gargling with warm salt water to help relieve a sore throat, or the socket of a recently pulled tooth. Saline solution is used for I.V. therapy, to flush and cleanse wounds or burns, and in molecular biology and biochemistry experiments. Of course salt can also have an extremely painful and poisonous effect. There’s a good reason for the expression, “Rubbing salt in a wound” - a very vivid and pointed figure of speech. It means kicking someone when they’re already down, crushing them when they’re already hurting or vulnerable. It’s taking that marvelous opportunity to show mercy and compassion, and using it instead to display an insensitive and just plain cruel spirit. “You are the salt of the earth.”

Throughout the past 2,000 years, some of humanity’s most constructive *and* destructive actions have been done in the name of Jesus Christ. Even as we gather here today to celebrate Christ’s welcoming and inclusive love, there are others who gather to promote bigotry, hatred, and violence - under the guise of being God’s true and righteous instruments. For many modern and rational individuals, this bizarre dichotomy is a convenient reason for giving up on God, and for walking away from the Church. For me, however, this dichotomy is a fundamental reason for staying with the Church, and actively serving as a member and minister of Brecksville United Church of Christ - a community of faith that truly gets it, and continually strives to let the Light of Christ’s love shine in and through all that we do.

For better, or for worse, there *are* a lot of “Salty Saints” scattered throughout this world. Some of them try to preserve and protect life; to respect and restore the dignity of all God’s children. Others prefer to promote division, dissension and deliberate damage -

under the distorted delusion that they're acting on behalf of an angry and judgmental god. As David Ewart points out in our Continuing Testament, "The difference between being wise or foolish is in *Acting*, or *Not Acting*. Jesus is essentially telling his followers, 'Look, here's what's at stake, and what's required of you: You are blessed, now go and be a blessing!' It is not enough for us to hear these words of Jesus; to study them; to be inspired by them. We must *act* on them, *practice* them and *live* them in our everyday lives."

"You *are* the salt of the earth!" Now go shake and scatter your good stuff, and make this world a better place!