

## Salt and Light

Isaiah 58: 1-9, Matthew 5: 11-16

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They say we need about a teaspoon of salt a day. The absence of salt leads to nausea, headaches, confusion, lethargy, loss of consciousness. Salt is essential to life. So is light. Without photosynthesis, with the conversion of light into energy, we wouldn't be here. God's first act of creation was light; no light, no life.

“You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world.”

Notice that Jesus does not say we may be or we shall be or we ought to be or that we will be salt and light—the voice is present tense—you are—you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.

The context of these sayings is significant. The context is the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew begins with these words, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them . . .” The implied auditors are disciples. While we might imagine that some in the crowd may have made their way up the mountain to hear Jesus, the sermon is clearly addressed to disciples, which is made patently clear by the end of the sermon's opening, when auditors are told that they are blessed when they are reviled, persecuted or slandered on “account” of Jesus. The salt of the earth and the light of the world are disciples of Jesus Christ. Notice also, and this is terribly important for a reading of this text, those who follow Jesus, disciples who are salt and light, are at risk. And they are at risk because they do not conform to the world. Conformists are not reviled. Conformists are not persecuted. Conformists do not have evil spoken against them; non-conformists do. It's not by happenstance that Jesus warns his disciples about the dangers of conformity to this world—salt can lose its saltiness; light can be hidden. Disciples conform when the price of being salt and light is too high. Disciples of Jesus must decide whether they will conform to the world or stand on the side of the Lord.

Some months ago someone said to me, “I think our church is suffering from lethargy, drift, disinterest; I don't know quite how to put it, but something is off.” Just last week another person said, “You know, I'm not usually in touch with these sorts of things, but it feels like our church is in a strange place. I'm not sure what it is, but it's just feels odd, unsettled.” Might our church be suffering from a lack of salt?

When salt is in low supply our bodies send warnings—nausea, headaches, confusion, lethargy—is our church suffering from a lack of salt? Jesus says this about salt: “If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.” Take a teaspoon of salt and dissolve it in a cup of water and it tastes salty enough; what about a bathtub full of water or a swimming pool? Most of us could hardly taste a teaspoon of salt in a swimming pool; a scientist with proper instruments could detect salt, but few others. When salt is dissolved, when salt particles are broken apart or separated, they are hard to detect. Salt loses its saltiness by dissolution, by the separation of its component parts. Salt loses its saltiness when it is dissolved.

Imagine the first disciples. Following Jesus put them at risk—reviled, persecuted, accused. Dissolution, melting into the crowd was likely a tempting survival tactic—no known associates; nobody to drag you down. By blending in, a person can vanish. We say there is strength in numbers, but if the numbers aren't there, if you are a fringe minority, which was certainly the case for the first followers of Jesus, the temptation would be great to go it alone, especially if being with your associates brought persecution or a bad reputation.

Of course this is not the first century and being followers hardly makes us subject to state sponsored persecution. We don't have to worry about being rounded up by state police. That threat doesn't prompt dissolution. The threat to our dissolution is more subtle, but no less real. Dissolution wears many guises. Here's my short list and in no particular order. I'm sure you can think of others. We are threatened by dissolution because we live in a consumer culture. We buy and sell goods and services. Why not religion; why not faith? Visitors to worship are commonly referred to as "church shoppers." The same label is applied to people who bounce from church to church when their needs are not met. Every church in America, no less than our own, is subject to consumerism. We must fight and resist it. Grace is not for sale. The sign over our door does not read, "Come in and let us meet your needs." The sign reads, "Called to Serve." We are called by God to serve the world. We are called to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to give ourselves to each other and to Christ who is our foundation. We are not a franchise. Grace isn't for sale.

We are threatened by dissolution because we live in a culture of rampant individualism. "Me, me, me." The church, however, is a covenant community. We are united by Jesus Christ. We are united not by our zip code or ethnicity or public policy positions. We are united by the Crucified and Risen Lord. In the next month, get to know someone in our church you don't know. Reach out—make the effort to know your neighbors.

We are threatened by dissolution because we live in a culture shaped by legacy. Jesus could care less about who our daddy was or where we went to school. Faith is not inherited. Faith is lived here and now in the presence of a living Lord.

We are threatened by dissolution because the Lord's Day is now negotiable. If you want to know why children's Sunday school classes are more than two-thirds empty on Sunday mornings, ask where parents are. I don't know many five year olds who can get themselves to church. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Find your treasure and you'll find your heart and most likely your body and soul.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house."

Jesus did not aim to be relevant; he aimed to be loyal to the rule of God and that loyalty but him out-of-step with his times. Jesus stood for the last, the least, the lost. Jesus stood on the side of the excluded, the forsaken. He attacked followers not because he fit in but because he practiced radical, generous hospitality. And he practiced radical, generous hospitality because he saw the in-breaking of the kingdom of God wherever he looked.

"The light shines in the darkness." Light can be hidden. Jesus says a bushel basket will do but light can hide most anywhere—behind the nod of a head when juicy gossip is told. Light can hide behind a busy schedule, laziness, self-indulgence, indifference. Indifference is a great place for light to hide. But there's another way light hides; light hides when it refuses to enter the darkness. Light is only seen against the night. Think about the stars. We can't see them during the day. To see the stars, we must enter the night. The night can be a frightening place. None of us wants to enter the night—not the night of a friend's sin; not the night of a stranger's confusion or despair; not the night of complex personal and social problems that refuse quick and easy solutions. The night is frightening. To be light, the church must enter the darkness. We must accept the risk of being seen by standing with the Crucified who died among and for sinners. Sanctimoniousness is a deadly enemy of the church. Jesus wasn't crucified, Jesus wasn't reviled because he proved himself right, Jesus was crucified because he stood with those whom no one else dared to stand with.

Jesus does not ask us to become something we are not; he invites us to be what we already are: salt and light. Faithfulness does not leave us separate and safe; faith brings us together into a noisy and troublesome church where we say No to that which makes us less human and Yes to the love and justice of God. Jesus names us salt and light. He calls us, one and all: "Follow me." Be the salt and light you are. Don't conform to the world—change it—you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. Amen.