

Be Salt. Be Light.

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Years ago, when Jess and I were first married, Jess took on most of the cooking because I was working full time and he was still looking for a job. And that was really brave of him because he wasn't really raised in the kitchen, so he had to learn a lot of things the hard way.

One evening I had some friends over – we had formed a vocal trio and were rehearsing -- and Jess decided to surprise us with dessert. He had purchased all the ingredients for a pecan pie, even buying that ready made crust that comes in the tin pan. When the timer went off, he opened the oven, and to his chagrin the pie filling looked like soup. He figured he must have messed something up, and set it aside. He decided to make us chocolate chip cookies instead, and proceeded to get out a recipe and put those together.

When the cookies came out of the oven, they looked beautiful. Until he took a bite. That's when he realized he had swapped the measurements for the sugar and the salt. You can imagine the taste.

Having no more options, he popped the pie back in the oven, in hopes it would somehow fix itself. And when it was time for dessert, low and behold the pie was perfectly done. When we lifted it from the oven, we realize the second cooking lesson of the evening: those pie plates come two to a pack. He had used them both. But luckily having too many pie plates wasn't the same as adding too much salt.

The moral of the story – a little salt goes a long way.

Which is good to know, when Jesus in today's Gospel passage from Matthew tells his followers, and by extension us, to be salt, and to be light in this world. We are not called to be the only flavor in the pot, nor are we called to blind people with our radiance. But we are called to make our faith unmistakably present in such a way that it enhances and preserves life for those who come hungry, and that it makes God's goodness visible to those who come looking.

If we are feeling like what we have in the faith department is pretty limited, or that we are just a few people in a big world, then it's reassuring to know that a little goes a long way. It doesn't take much salt, much light to make a big impact. But it also means that we still might have to bring everything we have to the table. This is not a parable about holding back, but about being fully present with everything we've been given, little as it might seem.

There is an old adage that there are two things that you shouldn't talk about in polite society. The first is politics. The second is ...(Religion.) If you want to keep the peace in the neighborhood, if you want to have calm holidays, or stay married -- keep those things to yourself.

The internet may have blown that away, but still I find that these still remain matters of privacy for many people – especially Episcopalians. That's really true when it comes to religion. It's a personal matter. We prefer private faith, quiet acts of piety. So quiet in fact that many people are often afraid to be asked what they believe, because they might not be sure of the answer.

But in today's Gospel Jesus suggests that his followers behave just the opposite. We are still listening in on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this week. Last week it gave us the Beatitudes. This week Jesus suggests that following him should be unmistakable and effective in the world like salt, like light.

Now in the ancient world, salt wasn't just a flavor, and it wasn't easy to get. It was used to preserve things, keep them from rotting, make them long lasting. It was rare and precious, and essential to survival. So to be like salt in Jesus' day, was to be like something that would preserve and protect, enhance. You couldn't mistake the taste of salt for anything other than what it was.

And consider light in a world that didn't have electricity and switches and lamps. We didn't have these things on a mass scale until really about 15 minute ago on the clock of human history. So when it got dark, it got really dark. You had to work to make light, to sustain in. To offer light to see by when there was so little of it available after the sun went down, would be a gift indeed.

So Jesus said to his followers, be salt, be light. Make it possible for others to taste and to see God's goodness in the world. Be findable, visible, unmistakable in your faith.

Now in his sermon on the mount, Jesus was not addressing folks in polite society, who might lose some status if they spoke of things that made their peers uncomfortable. He was talking to his disciples, mostly fishermen with a tax collector and zealot or two thrown in for good measure. Last week we discussed some of the characteristics of these people who had decided to dedicate their lives to the gospel – they were meek and poor compared to the powers they were up against; they had suffered losses that broke their hearts; they were hungry for the good things that come from God; they were living amid the kind of conflicts that called for mercy and peacemaking. They were persecuted and threatened with death. These were the qualities that Jesus said were blessed. With beatitudes like these, you might just want to hide under a bushel basket until it was safe to come out.

But despite all that, Jesus said, the work of the Gospel is not private work, it is not personal – it is meant to be public, to be recognizable and to be inviting so that others can see it and be drawn to God. Be salt. Be light. Be unmistakable. St. Francis was known to say "Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words." He was talking about this kind of discipleship.

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These were not new ideas. They were very familiar to any follower of Jesus who also went to Synagogue on Saturday and paid attention when the Scroll of Isaiah was opened. We have a nice selection today from Isaiah that paints a very good picture of what being salt of the earth and light of the world actually looks like. If you want help people to taste and see the goodness of the Lord then:

Loose the bonds of injustice; undo the thongs of the yoke. Let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. When you see the naked, cover them, and do not to hide yourself from your own kin (which reminds me, I need to call my mom).

Remove the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil. Satisfy the needs of the afflicted.

Isaiah here is talking about religion. It might even look a little like politics, in that it has to do with how people are treated not just privately but societally. You can't have a covenant with God without those elements, Isaiah insists. A nicely designed ritual or a rigorous fast won't cut it, if these are absent.

Isaiah made it clear to Israel that God wanted the faith of God's people to make a difference in their world and to those around them. And Isaiah suggested that they would be on the right track if you start seeing these results:

Your wounds would start to heal – the really deep, spiritual and social ones. You'd call upon God and be able to understand the answer. Your hunger and your thirst for what is right would be quenched. You would thrive and your numbers would grow.

“ You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” Isaiah says. This statement stops me in my tracks. “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

Because think of the size and the width and the breadth of the breach that divides people right now -- the great yawning chasm that separates people. Think about the state of our streets -- the violence in them and the hatred, the ways people use them to flee from one another.

What would it mean to be repairers of the breach in our absolutely polarized political discourse today? It would not mean keeping what we know of the love and mercy and justice of Christ to ourselves for fear of making others uncomfortable. It would not mean creating false equivalents as if all opinions had equal value. Not when people's dignity and lives are at stake. But it might mean weakening the powers that oppress, it might involve freeing people. It might mean responding to hunger, and homelessness and vulnerability in a way that addresses both immediate needs and root causes. These things can be done in ways that are merciful and peaceful and compassionate.

What would it mean to be called restorers of the streets to live in? I ask this question thinking about the death of Tyre Nichols, a Black man who was buried this week, after he was killed by Memphis police. I ask this question thinking about a colleague of mine on the Diocesan Anti-Racism Commission who lost her nephew to gun violence this month. I ask this question thinking about my own nephew who died of a drug overdose a year ago, the day after he got out of rehab. What are we keeping inside that Jesus is asking us to voice, to let loose, to illuminate on our darkened streets?

Be salt. Be light. A little goes a long way. And in this world where people are straining for Good News, and yearning to taste and see love, and goodness, and acceptance and hope, God asks us to bring all that we are and nothing less to the table. Amen.