

## **Re-salting**

Menno Mennonite Church

February 9, 2020

**Purpose:** To re-affirm the calling to be people of God's light, God's salt in contrast to the world as it is.

**Message:** We are invited by Jesus to be that which we are for—bearing the witness of God's love in the world.

**Scripture:** Matthew 5: 13-20 (I will read); First reading: Isaiah 58:5-9

**Synopsis:** These are not easy standards to meet. We are told who we are—the elements in the world that bear God's love to the world. This is an ambitious calling, and we know that it can become tiring in time to continue to bear this role. Jesus is inducting us into the kingdom by telling us precisely the nature of that kingdom—the counter culture witnessing of what God is doing in the world. It is this identity that we carry into the world. It is our mission to that which the world requires not as a means of our own virtue, but as reflections of God's peace.

Matthew 5:13–20 (The Message)

**Salt and Light**

13 “Let me tell you why you are here.  
You’re here to be salt-seasoning  
that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.

If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?  
You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

14–16 “Here’s another way to put it:  
You’re here to be light,  
bringing out the God-colors in the world.  
God is not a secret to be kept.

We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.

If I make you light-bearers,  
you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?

I’m putting you on a light stand.  
Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!  
Keep open house; be generous with your lives.  
By opening up to others,  
you’ll prompt people to open up with God,  
this generous Father in heaven.

17–18 “Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—  
either God’s Law or the Prophets.

I’m not here to demolish but to complete.  
I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama.

God’s Law is more real and lasting  
than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet.

Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God’s Law will be alive and working.

19–20 “Trivialize even the smallest item in God’s Law  
and you will only have trivialized yourself.  
But take it seriously,  
show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom.

Unless you do far better than the Pharisees  
in the matters of right living,  
you won’t know the first thing about entering the kingdom.

I have a library—a digital library, being who I am—of the things that help me preach. I use an application that allows me to clip, mark-up, note and categorize all sorts of articles and ideas as I come across them for later use. I have within it nearly 1600 elements of articles, lecture notes, comments, pictures and quotes with all sorts of explanations and categorizations for later use. I also have within this same structure almost every sermon I have ever prepared and performed—more than 350 or so if you are counting-- similarly saved and files for future reference and rework now and again. What previous generations of pastors would have devoted filing cabinets to, I maintain digitally for reference and connection on the fly.

So it is a rare occasion that I turn to this resource and come up dry. Especially when like today I am referring to the lectionary texts—that 3 year cycle of readings for each week of the church year. But so it was this week; only one article and a single citation in a sermon where I was honestly using this turn of the Sermon on the Mount text to speak to something other than the Sermon on the mount. Its kind of like that occasion that was a bit more common when less of our world was online and you would go out and enter search terms until you hit upon on that retrieved only a single result. There was a term for that—a Google Wack. It was a rare, and unusual species. For such a familiar passage, in such a familiar section of the gospels—the Sermon on the Mount, the very heart of Anabaptist thought and theology why I have never engaged this text is a bit of mystery, and certainly steered my choosing for this week. Generally, if there is something you haven't engaged, it is worth at least stopping and asking why. Especially if you don't have a particularly good answer.

If I am forced to answer why there was dust sitting on this particular part of the sermon, I guess I would have to cite the contempt of familiarity. Often times, it is the stuff with which we are most familiar with that we hold the most loosely. You are the salt of the earth O people—the hymn goes and it is one I sing with gusto and enthusiasm. But it is exactly that basic message of identity and purpose that feels so familiar and so safe that it doesn't need to be engaged all that carefully. We know it, we have heard it from Sunday School on up. We are Christians. We are the representative of Jesus Christ. We let our little light shine, our flavor to be known in the name of the one who sent us. End of story. Go and do likewise. Not a huge amount of sermonic material there. Combine that with some dis-ease around the history of the missional movements and some of the ways that the spreading of the gospel has been sometimes too closely tied with

the destruction of other people and cultures, and I think we have a diagnosis. I am not saying that this is good; but I am being honest.

So with that out there, where do we begin in working with this. I think it has to be with some grammatical study first and foremost. Just a quick poll here by a show of hands: when Jesus is speaking about *You* being the salt of the earth, how many of you take this personally, as in you means me and this is a personal project? A quick show of hands. I think that is how I learned it, and most of the time how I hear it—you, Bryce, are the Salt of the earth and when you fail in that saltiness, what good are you? As important as a bit of self-reflection around my personal capacity for flavor might be, that fundamentally is not what is being talked about here. The you in this case is the second person plural second person pronoun. What that amounts to is that we miss that meaning, as is so often the case within English translation that the meaning here is something that is obscured by our language, and our inclination to make all of our religious language and practice a highly individualized and personalized thing, that we don't really think about many other translations. We need to borrow from our southern dialect speaking friends here and bring this around to "Y'all are the salt of the earth; You all are a city on the hill" The command here is a command to the body—an element we each bear responsibility for to be sure—but they are not by ourselves alone. Like the Second generation Christians in Matthew's community we listen with the crowd and hear that we too are "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" ( and I think the city on a hill thing ought to ring familiar to us here at Menno). Jesus is telling us who we are; but doing so by using metaphors of purpose and intention in the world. As it was in their day, so it is in ours—they always leave us wondering after our ability to suit the bill. We wonder after our saltiness and the quality of our light.

Because these words are dynamic and they churn things up. Writer Marcia Riggs points out that it is entirely possible for us to 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" (Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol. 1). In short, all those people that Jesus have just named as blessed in the beatitudes directly before this (again something we omit when we read out of context) are precise the ones who are part of the blessing of the kingdom to whom we are to owe our allegiance. Jesus sermon was setting out the ways and means of the kingdom o God, and this salt

and light identity is his thesis statement when it comes to those who would comprise that kingdom. From here he launches into a series of commandments that we know well, each with the structure “you have heard it said/but I tell you.” What Jesus is doing is joining the long prophetic line which has come before him and calling Israel—the people of YHWH to be who they are called to be—the people incarnating God with them in the world. We like them, like the first reader’s of Matthew’s gospel are left to ask ourselves what does it mean for a Christian to be a Christian in time such as these, even as Jesus commands and impowers by inviting us to surpass the conventional and institutionalized practices of righteousness for something else with a wholly different character entirely. We are doing what our forebearers have always and often done: ask ourselves how best to be Christians, obedient not the demands of God, but to the life giving spirit of YHWH God in a world that keeps changing every time we look around.

I think that these are the right words for times such as these. We are in the early stages of an extended debate on what shape and what ideas are good within our society in the form of an electoral year. I am loath to delve too deeply here except to say this: no matter who says it, or what the suggestion might be, there is no political policy or function of party under any banner which will ever encapsulate the Kingdom of God. We can debate and argue until the cows come home, as well we should about what might be best for our nation, our world, but we should never confuse the priorities of power with the nature or the function of the Kingdom. Because these worlds are not the same, and they never will be. *It is our job to be salt and light in the world, and by its very nature that salt will always be found in contrast alongside the world, not acquiescence to it.* Also, we all must remember this always: the job of savior has been filled and that is Jesus Christ. There will never be any politician who will save us from our ills. We do well to remember that as we proceed through the coming months of debate and division.

I suggest this by way of recalling us to our work in the world. It's powerful to think of that tiny bit of flavoring--a single courageous voice, a community of lively faith--making a huge difference in a much larger entity, that is, a world gone madly cynical and distracted with that which does not feed our souls. This humble, ancient yet contemporary image reminds us that we live and love not just for our own little worlds, our families and friends, but for the whole world that God loves, whether we "like" it or not. We do this out of our deeply personal faith whose personal nature being protectively private. Being Salt and light in the world means loving the neighbor that we deal with daily, and the stranger far away. It means prioritizing the Gospel of

peace over all things, perhaps even our own safety. It means caring about those people who hurt, even if our caring cannot fix their problems: the children in our schools who come hungry, the teens who are bullied, and those who do the bullying, the powerless who come looking for a better life and the powerful people with whom we may disagree. We must love those with whom we find common cause and those with whom we disagree vehemently—how else could we ever move forward. We love the victims of the world, those caught in poverty and addiction and impossibility and systems beyond their control. We do this not because we are good, or that Jesus somehow magically makes it all easy, whether we find these people inside our congregation or without. But we do this, all this and so much more, because that is who we are: little Christs offering the flavor of life, lighting the nature of the kingdom through that which we do and that which we leave undone.

I like the words of Madeleine L'Engle concerning evangelism captures the nature of Jesus' words well: *"We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."*

I don't think it accidental that these words of Isaiah to the people of an exiled Israel are paired with each other. They both call their audience to the work of being who they most are, hard though that may be at times. Our calling is about building the kingdom, not necessarily the institutions which we have associated with the kingdom.

Friends, may we be the flavor we are meant to be; may we shine the light that is ours loving always; for we can do no other, come what may.

I want to leave you with these words from writer Marianne Williamson, quoted by Nelson Mandela:

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.... We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*