

Salt of the Earth

When I hear Jesus' words to his disciples:

“You are the salt of the earth: but if salt has lost its taste,
How can its saltiness be restored?

My brain goes contrary and asks: Just how can salt lose its taste?
And of course, I'm thinking of those little salt granules
We put on our food.

To relate to Jesus' teaching, it helps me

To picture a salt lick out in a field;
They're put out for livestock.

Have you ever seen one that's down to practically nothing—
Just this dirty grey lump with all the salt licked out?
Now there's salt that has lost its taste!

Another image and memory is losing a tooth

After all the wiggling and jiggling, tugging,
Wrapping thread around it,
The tooth comes out

And I have this marvelous hole for my tongue to play in.
And mom says: “Rinse that with saltwater!”

Aha! Salt loses its taste doesn't it, when diluted down with water?

Its not much good any longer for preserving and enhancing food.
Salt is vital for life!

With the beatitudes that you probably heard last week,

Jesus describes the ideal characteristics
Of his followers-to-be

Many who are sitting, standing, right there around him
Up there on that mountain.

Might we need a quick review?

Blessed, meaning happy, satisfied...

Blessed are

The poor in spirit---knowing one needs God
Those who mourn---having compassion for the suffering
The meek---not seeking more than is rightfully yours
Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
The merciful---not seeking revenge, payback, being forgiving, helping

The pure in heart---being sincere, honest
The peacemakers
Those who are persecuted
And those who are reviled and persecuted on the account of Jesus

Jesus continues on with his teaching and in essence tells them
You know, what I just told you is important
REALLY IMPORTANT!
And not just for you, but also for others.

You are the salt of the earth!

You are the light of the world!
Not just for yourselves
Or even for just your family, friends, religious community...
Listen to me.....

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. A CITY BUILT ON A HILL CANNOT BE HIDDEN. NO ONE AFTER LIGHTING A LAMP PUTS IT UNDER THE BUSHEL BASKET, BUT ON THE LAMPSTAND, AND IT GIVES LIGHT TO ALL IN THE HOUSE.” Light to all the house...light to all the world.

“LET THEM SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS (the works of the beatitudes) so that they in turn give glory to your Father in heaven.

It is so difficult for us to even possibly imagine
How radical were the words of Jesus to the people surrounding him that day.
Share our faith? Talk to Gentiles?
Do good works outside our own Jewish circles?
What??? Why??? What business is it of ours? It goes against
All our traditions.....
Can you imagine the buzz of conversations as he’s talking.

Consider with me for a moment:

To become a Jew, one had to be born a Jew.
It was not a matter of personal choice.
There were a few converts to Judaism,
But converting others was not the thrust of their religious life.

The law, the Torah was and is the basis of the Jewish belief structure.
It is seen as a gift.
And it affirms their separation
From other nations
And their unique relationship to God.

And there sat Jesus telling the disciples
And anyone else within hearing distance:
That the fulfillment of the law requires them
To be the salt of the earth
And the light of the world
For that is what they are.

I don't hear Jesus saying:
You can choose to be salt and light or not; its up to you.
When you learn enough from me, then you can be salt and light.
When you are having a good day and everything is going your way,
You can be salt and light.

No, he's saying to those men and women
Getting ready to walk with him:
This is who you are.
This is your God-given identity.
This is your calling...
Right now.

You are all the seasoning and shine the world has at this very moment.
You are the revelation of God's own presence on earth.
And it is so vitally important
That you do not let any threat or fear
Keep you from growing into your full potential
As children of God.

This powerful-mind-shaking, soul-stirring message
Took the followers of Jesus years to really hear
And maybe understand enough
To begin to grow into.

It took years of watching, questioning;
sometimes fearful, sometimes jubilant,
sometimes getting it all wrong.
It took death, resurrection, Holy spirit.

But that day, that day of radical teaching,
I imagine that some of them
Came down from that mountain a wee bit changed...

Changed by the ringing promise that comes with each blessing
With each challenging action...
Including that of trying to be salt and light.

God is with you.
God cares for you.
God provides for you.

And hopefully,
We too, go forth today,
Just a wee bit changed.

For we too, of course, are called to be salt and light
Agents of teaching, healing and hope
To those we encounter.
And not to just those with whom we are comfortable.

The world needs to know that
Loving God is not about being perfect.
It's about loving God and neighbor.
It's about being righteous,
Which in the biblical sense means caring for the most vulnerable people
Most often characterized in scripture
as the widows, orphans, resident aliens and the poor.

And in the context of Jesus' message today
The vulnerable are those who have yet
to hear the good news of God's love and forgiveness
Being proclaimed by Jesus.

In scripture, the Pharisees and scribes
Are often used as examples of unrighteousness.
The unrighteous though can be anyone, even a disciple,
Who blocks the light of God,
Anyone who turns the law into a stumbling block,
A fence, a tomb, devoid of light and life
For many and ultimately for themselves.

There's something remarkable, something so creative and life-giving
About God's love, God's grace, God's righteousness.
The more you give it away,
The more you seem to receive.

I really think that's what it means to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It means being part of that endless exchange with God:

Receiving God's love, grace, righteousness.

Doing the good works, giving the credit to God.

Receiving God's love, grace, righteousness.

Doing the good works, giving the credit to God.

Receiving, doing, receiving, doing.

John Newton is best known as the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace".

How the writing of that hymn came about

Is just one of a myriad conversion stories that have

Occurred down through the centuries

Because someone or ones were brave enough

To be salt of the earth, light of the world.

A profitable slave trader for years,

John Newton grew attracted to Christianity

And one day, when in his ship's cabin

Reading a sermon of John Wesley,

He suddenly saw the evil of what he was doing.

He actually ordered his ship to turn around in mid-ocean

And return to Africa

Where he set his human cargo free.

And he truly entered the kingdom of heaven,

The reign of God.

His freedom from the bondage of self

From self-righteousness

Yielded freedom for others and stills does today.

His transformation touched and still touches lives today.

"I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Think about it:

John's conversion did not happen in isolation on that ship,

It began that day Jesus gathered his followers on the mountain.

And then was fed and nourished by the words and works of others

Until that moment in his cabin of truly awakening to God.

And then, John Newton's conversion transformed his life,
the lives of the slaves he freed,
the lives of many who heard his story
and were moved to question their own actions of supporting slavery.

And still today transforms lives as people hear his story and hymn
And are touched with the life-saving hope of being found by God.

As still this morning, in this place, Jesus reveals to us:
God yearns for you to know and experience
That real living is more than just seeing to one's own needs
Its still about loving God and loving neighbor.
Its still about doing righteousness—caring for the most vulnerable
Still about being God's salt of the earth.
God's light to the world.

We are the salt of the earth!
We are the light of the world!