

Taste and See

Isaiah 58:6-8; Matthew 5:13-16

Whitefish UMC

February 6, 2011

- † Did you know that we are in the midst of National Salt Week? And so on cue, we were once again reminded that too much salt, which is what most of us consume, is bad for us. And while salt is a dietary mineral we can't live without, we consume two to three times the daily recommended upper limit of salt.
- † Salt runs in the veins of our bodies and our language. There are reminders everywhere of salt's former glory. The word "salary" is derived from salt, because Roman soldiers were paid in salt. Salt is at the root of sauce, salsa, salad and many other words. Ancient wars were waged over salt.
- † But today, those of us in the developed world are waging a war against too much salt. Most of the problem comes not from too much salt shaken by us onto our food when we sit down at the table, but on salt hidden in lethal doses in much of the processed food we eat. But it does make food taste better, as the children learned.
- † Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest, theologian, and gourmet cook wrote a theological cookbook, and in its preface he writes: "Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet, at our best, we know better. Butter glorifies everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you get not sudden

death, but Hollandaise, which in its own way is not less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip or a Bach fugue.” (Preface, p. xiii)

- † And so with this in mind, let us celebrate that we are called by Jesus—individually, one by one, and together as his church—to be salt of the earth and light of the world. But what on earth does that mean?
- † One of the great divides in the church these days is whether we should focus on a personal relationship with Jesus and our own salvation or on the needs of the world—and the communities around us. The other night, JJ and I were talking after youth group about the many ways that religion divides us rather than unites us.
- † This old pastor had to quit at nine o’clock and go home to rest, but we could have hashed it out all night and beyond. Why do people choose one religion over another? And once you have decided which of the world religions to be a part of, what leads you to one sect or denomination of it over another?
- † The next day, I picked this book off my shelves: The Handbook of Denominations in the United States. Originally written over 60 years ago, it’s been revised a dozen times. The current edition is 395 pages long. I find that both intriguing and depressing. If you take the time to read about some of the many divisions in the Christian church, you’ll find that some of the silliest things separate us.
- † As Marcus Borg says, My favorite example is a story that I heard 35 years ago, and I’ve never had the chance to check it out to see if it’s really factual. But this one comes from the late 1800’s in North Carolina shortly after the Civil War. A small town businessman from a remote community in the mountains of North Carolina went to one of the larger cities--I think it was Raleigh--and there for the first time in his life, he saw an ice-making machine.

- † Now, machines that could make artificial ice were a recent invention; he thought this was wonderful because it meant you could have ice all summer long. So he returned to his small community in the mountains of North Carolina--he happened to be a Baptist--and told his Baptist church about this great new invention. Within a month the church had split into ice and no-ice Baptists. The theological issue in this case being is it a violation of the natural order established by God to make ice out of season. If God had wanted us to have ice in the summertime, God would have raised the freezing temperature of water seems to have been the argument.
- † I can't help wondering what Jesus would think about all of this, can you? But then it dawned on me that he was right in the middle of a similar debate. And today's scriptures from both Isaiah and Matthew demonstrate that controversy.
- † As John Buchanan explains so well: "In the Bible there is an internal dialogue going on. On the one hand, there are those who define religion as adhering to the religious law, practicing the rituals, praying, fasting, sacrificing. It is the religion of the temple.
- † On the other hand, in the Bible there are those who define religion on the basis of the difference it makes in the way life is lived. This is a religion that advocates for the poor, the weak and vulnerable. If the other is a Religion of the Temple, this is a Religion of the Streets, Homes, Marketplaces. The priest represents one; the prophet the other.
- † So Isaiah:
- † Why do we fast, but you do not see?
 . . . Is not this the fast that I choose:
 to loose the bonds of injustice, . . .

to share your bread with the hungry,
to bring the homeless poor into your house?

- † That's the real thing, Isaiah is saying: religion that manifests itself in the world and the world becoming better, kinder, fairer for everyone. When you do those things—loose bonds of injustice, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless—“your light shall break forth like the dawn.” It's not either-or: either Temple or Street, Ritual, or Social Action. It's both-and. It is the genius of Judaism, and it is our richest, most authentically biblical tradition.
- † Jesus was accused of subverting the religious law in his day, Temple Religion. His consistent critics were the Pharisees who practiced Temple Religion, were totally and admirably devoted to the laws and rituals of their religion. He, on the other hand, insisted that when he welcomed the unclean to his table, which the law prohibited, when he spoke with a sinful woman, he was not subverting the law but fulfilling it, practicing its true intent.
- † That is what he had in mind one day, early in his public ministry, when he reached back into the scriptures and invoked two powerful images: “You are the salt of the earth,” he told his disciples. “You are the light of the world.” Remember Isaiah? “When you feed the hungry and shelter the homeless . . . your light will break forth like the dawn.” And the psalmist: gracious, merciful, righteous people “rise in the darkness as a light.” “You are the light of the world, salt of the earth,” Jesus says to his followers.
- † A few years ago there was a band called “Blood, Sweat, and Tears.” Have you ever noticed that those very elemental parts of a passionate life involve a lot of salt? These salty signs of life—blood, sweat, and tears—remind us continually of the cost of life, and its preciousness.
- † Jesus gave abundantly of all three—weeping at the death of a friend, sweating in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at the end giving up his blood

along with his life. Blood, sweat, and tears are part of our own life—if we are going to be truly alive and if we are going to follow Jesus.

- † Why? Because they are sacramental signs of a compassionate heart. That heart is what Jesus asked his disciples for—asks us for—a heart of flesh, fully alive, connected to other human beings and the whole of creation, able to feel with and respond to the pain and joy of others.
- † So salt and light are active, powerful metaphors for the Christian life. Salt and light change things, make a big difference in our lives and in the life of the world. And so if we are salt and light for each other and for the world, as Jesus is salt and light to us, then it is really pretty simple.
- † We talked last week about the great commandment—loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength—and our neighbors as ourselves. So first, we are called to love God and love what God loves. And what does God love? Think of the best known verse in the Christian Bible: John 3:16—“For God so loved the world...”
- † God loves the world—not just me or you or just Christians or just people—but all of creation. God doesn’t like what happens in or to the world all the time, but that’s where the next part comes in.
- † God doesn’t like the violence of the world, the despair, the meanness of people, including us, sometimes. So being a Christian means opening ourselves to transformation so that we can become more loving of God and the world that God loves. This means paying attention to our relationship with God—through prayer, and through gathering together in worship.
- † And God knows we can’t do this on our own. So we are meant to be a part of a community that is passionate about the transformation of the world and of ourselves. It’s not so much about beliefs, although there are some

important things that we are called to believe—that God loves us and the world, for example, and wants us to love as well.

† Frederick Buechner writes,

† Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. That is what Jesus tells the disciples to be. That is what he tells his church, tells us to be. Love each other, heal the sick, raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons.

† The gracious promise is that when we do that, the world actually becomes a little better. A little bit of the kingdom of God actually comes into the world—to you and me—and our light shall break forth like the dawn.

† In a few moments we will taste goodness of the salt of the earth and of our faith—in the symbolic and very real presence of the blood, sweat, and tears of our savior. Will you see the Christlight shining from the faces of our companions at the table? I see it. I know it.

† For we remember, that on the night....

Sources:

Dr. Marcus Borg, “What’s Christianity All About?” <http://day1.org>

John Buchanan, “To Make the World Better,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schiori, <http://day1.org>

Dr. Ayala, “Just a Pinch of Salt,” <http://shineyahoo.com/channel/health>

