

“Why So Salty?”
Rev. Lynne Keel
February 9, 2020

One of the perks of raising teenagers is having access to and being trained in the fine art of teen vernacular. While the rest of the world has to resort to Urban Dictionary to interpret pop culture, I have my own nightly immersion program around the dinner table spilling the tea, hearing the latest bop, throwing shade, learning what leaving someone on red means and various TikTok references. If you have no idea what I just said, I encourage you volunteer with our youth program for your own personal immersion program. They are great teachers.

One such gem of the teen slang that has been thrown around our house, although I think it’s probably dated now, is the word “salty.” It means being upset, angry, or bitter about something, usually small things. So if you ask your friend or co-worker a question and he or she snaps at you, you might ask, “Why are you being so salty?” or, for short, “Why so salty?” The person who cut you in line at the store, the DMV worker who has had it with your questions, the infamous comments section of online news articles, people shopping at WalMart; these are all examples of salty behavior.

We live in a salty world dealing in sarcasm, pessimism, and bitterness as our default mode. We are salty about the weather, we are salty about waiting in line, we are salty about discomfort or inconvenience of any kind, and obviously, we are salty about politics, religion, and homeowner’s associations. There seems to be grumpiness and impatience everywhere we turn.

This morning’s scripture is about saltiness, **but** it is saltiness of an entirely different stripe. Jesus was preaching the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples after a busy and intense schedule of preaching, teaching and healing in Galilee. If you remember from last week, he was preaching the Beatitudes: blessed are the poor in Spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, and the peacemakers for they all are children of God and will receive God’s mercy. Moving to this morning’s text, he then went on to say to his disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Clearly, Jesus has a different idea about saltiness than we do. I found this morning’s text to take on fresh meaning when reading Eugene Peterson’s translation called the Message which I will share with you today. I will be reading Matthew 5:13-20, and I invite you to listen for the Spirit:

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



70 Union Street North
Concord, NC 28025
(704) 788-2100
info@firstpresconcord.org

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.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Like the disciples, we receive the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety as a holy vision for what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Like the disciples, we, too, have been named, claimed, and called by God to be **active participants** in God's Kingdom here on earth. Like the disciples, we heard the Beatitudes expand this holy vision to include everyone, including and especially the have nots. Like the disciples, we have been told who we are and what we are called to do in this morning's passage, and there are three primary components to this text that we will examine. 1) We are the salt of the earth, 2) we are the light of the world, and 3) our righteousness shall exceed all previous standards of righteousness.

Beginning with this idea of salt, Urban Dictionary aside, what does this mean, exactly, to be Jesus' definition of salt? I want to lift up Eugene Peterson's phrase again: "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?**" I'm a bit of a foodie, so I love this idea of exploring the concept of "God-flavors:" what sorts of flavors point to God and godliness? I find another scriptural passage using food to be instructive. Remember the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians? Let me jog our memories of what these God flavors are, these God flavors that Jesus calls us to season the world with; they are Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self Control.¹ So basically the polar opposite of our contemporary slang definition of being salty, right?

These kinds of flavors Jesus invites us to bring out in the world can be seen in the work he had just completed in Galilee in Chapter 4 of Matthew. The text reads, "²³ Jesus^[c] went throughout Galilee, **teaching** in their synagogues and **proclaiming** the good news^[d] of the kingdom and **curing** every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them." Jesus fed the crowds with these fruits of the Spirit and through the Sermon on the Mount was now empowering the disciples to do the same.

¹ Galatians 5:22-23.

Jesus went on to tell them they are the light of the world or in Peterson's words, "You're here to be light, bringing out the **God-colors** in the world." What powerful imagery this is: salt and light, the very flavors and colors of God! It turns out that discipleship is a feast for the senses, a banquet table that has been set for all of creation. Not only are we to not hide or obscure God's vision, but we are to **shine**, to reflect, to amplify those God-colors. In other words, don't be shy, let these fruits engage all five senses and melt our Frozen Chosen hearts in favor of something more attention-getting, vibrant, and lively. If we are being the light that God calls us to be, God's love will not only be out in plain sight for all to see, but love's effervescence will capture the attention of everyone.

Jesus went on to make clear that he did not come to throw out or replace the Hebrew law or prophetic texts, which sometimes we Christians get confused about. His goal was to bring health and wholeness to these faith practices and commandments of his birth, and we are called to do the same. He set the bar high by encouraging his disciples' righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees who set the utmost religious standards of the day. This was not to say that the disciples needed to increase their piety or observances of said traditional practices. This was, instead, an invitation to live and embody their faith through love, mercy, and justice as part of a fuller expression of worshipping and praising God. Our first reading from Isaiah 58 had some sharp, direct words for the Israelites about taking their religious practices a step further: *"⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;"*

Being salt and light in the world means that everyone around us can taste and see that the Lord is good. We, who have spent the better part of our lives in pews and Sunday School classes obtaining knowledge about our faith, are called to enact what we have learned out in the **world** that the **world** may be healed by tasting and seeing God in their midst. In our denomination, Baby Boomers make up the largest percentage of our membership, so if you assumed that cradle Presbyterians of that age range have attended worship and Sunday School their whole lives, they would have spent upwards of 6,500+ hours a piece learning about Jesus and worshipping God. Theoretically, that's a lot of salt and light. Yet diminishing attendance numbers in church and the stifling, misuse, and abuse of God's holy word in our public sphere just this past week are telling a very different and disturbing story.

As Karoline Lewis, preaching professor at Luther Seminary points out, "It is not enough to know about God. As disciples, we have to be the **activity** of God in the world. It is knowledge without action that perpetuates existence of racism in our world. It is knowledge without action that contributes to our silence about sexism. It is knowledge

² Isaiah 58:6-8

without action that continues to oppress the poor, to ostracize the marginalized, to overlook the hungry.”³

In other words, if we disciples are not actively involved in addressing racism, sexism, poverty, unjust immigration policies, climate change, and protecting the most vulnerable in our world, then we are not being salt and light in this world. Our churches have gotten so comfortable with our own comfort and conformity within these walls, that we have forgotten how to be salt and light out in the world. Or maybe we haven’t forgotten as much as we are afraid of the price of salt and light. As Lewis says, “the salt just might sting and the light just might expose what we do not want to see.”

I think many of us struggle daily with what it means to be salt and light out in the world. The fruits of the Spirit sound delicious, but we can have doubts and be cynical of their fruitfulness. The world seems so loud, toxic, and broken right now, that it feels like salting the earth and lighting the world would be drowned out or fall on blind eyes and deaf ears. It has been hard to stomach the meanness and attacks on social media to the point that I can barely stand to scroll anymore. My anxiety goes up when listening, reading, or watching the news only to see the new low to which humanity has sunk. It can feel so discouraging and hopeless at times, that we can lose our taste for sharing the fruits of the Spirit. I have become more and more convinced that everyone needs to take a sabbatical and go to therapy. Let’s just all go to time out and think about what we’ve done.

This past week, I read a newsletter by Lutheran pastor, author and speaker Nadia Bolz Weber about a message on Twitter she recently received. Because of her public persona, she receives a lot of messages - some good, some bad, some downright ugly. A person sent her a message mocking her physical appearance and followed that up with “get cancer.” Not, “gee, I’m not sure I’m following your theology” or “I didn’t agree with what you said in that sermon.” Just a complete, visceral attack on her humanity. I won’t repeat her first thought as it contains an expletive, understandably so, I think. But her second thought was “Dang. That’s so much pain.” And she wasn’t just thinking of her pain; she was thinking of the amount of pain this messenger had to be in to write such a hateful message.

Bolz Weber was inspired by Franciscan friar Richard Rohr who said, “You can tell a lot about someone by what they do with their pain – do they transform it or do they transmit it?” She considered both options: Option one being “Transmit my hurt and pass it like a basketball either back to the person who hurt me, or to someone more convenient – like that guy who is driving too slow in the left lane, or maybe my partner.” It occurs to me that our world seems to be in a vicious cycle of transmitting our pain to others. In our fears about the future and frustrations with leadership, we transmit our anxieties, our anger, our baggage, and any other toxic uncomfortable thing we might be holding at the moment. And when we do that, it gets multiplied and passed to the next person.

The second option is to transform the pain. Bolz Weber said, “Perhaps I remember that no one who feels well-loved, who is a psychologically integrated person, and who has a happy

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3156

life would ever choose to send someone a direct message telling them they look like a freak and should 'get cancer.' Someone has hurt them and I know what that feels like."⁴ She is choosing the path of compassion and empathy. While this messenger of meanness might deserve a taste of his or her own medicine, Bolz Weber says that transmitting this pain feels like poison and transforming it feels like freedom. And maybe that is where salt and light begins in all this mess.

Daily, myself and others wonder how we will recover from the breach of trust in our country and each other. It seems everyone I talk to feels betrayed by the war of words and actions that have been hurled carelessly at each other. Friends and family no longer trust each other and strangers nervously avoid conversations and connection because "what if I find out they side with my enemies?"

So as followers of Jesus Christ, maybe we work towards righteousness by transforming the pain rather than transmitting it. Let me be clear that this does not mean avoiding the pain altogether. Avoiding the pain is just another way to transmit the pain at ten times the force. For instance, there's been a lot of chatter around the church regarding the flags here in the sanctuary, and there is a lot of pain on all sides of the issue at hand. While some would prefer to avoid the discussion altogether, I think this is a perfect opportunity for us as a community to practice being salt and light together. Rather than avoiding and therefore transmitting our pain on the subject, what if we engaged the work of transforming our pain?

I believe this means listening to each other, really listening, and deeply respecting viewpoints different than our own. If we remain calm when we hear things that offend us, perhaps we can show empathy and compassion for the pain behind those statements instead of fighting fire with fire. Critical to this work, of course, is radical self care: taking care of our bodies, setting healthy boundaries, seeking professional help and guidance (I wasn't joking about universal therapy), and of course, lots and lots of prayer and study. We cannot be salt and light without tending to the source and foundation of our flavors and our fire.

Bringing out the God flavors and colors in the world is about appealing to our better angels and grounding our identity as the image and reflection of the Divine. I believe it was also Richard Rohr who pointed out that Genesis 1 where God created humanity and called it good always comes before Genesis 3 where we stumble. We are always, first and foremost, **made of** and **created for** goodness. By calling us salt and light, Jesus is affirming this inherent goodness and his confidence in our abilities to bring out the best in the world. This rag tag team of disciples were not called because of any special talents or achievements. Jesus proclaimed this blessing of salt and light by virtue of their presence and willingness to show up. He says to anyone who will listen, "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." Thanks be to God, Amen.

⁴ <https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/im-dabbling-in-compassion>