

“Salt & Light & Covenant Talk”

Matthew 5: 13 – 29

February 5, 2017

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

Can you imagine a world without salt?

It’s easy for me to imagine a world with less salt; I have been critiqued by my spouse for not using enough salt in my cooking, thus always making sure the salt shaker is on the table next to his plate. It’s easier to add salt than to take it out. Less salt, yes, I can imagine that but a world without salt? A world where salt has lost its savor, it’s ability to bring out the flavor of a meal? It would be pretty bland.

Can you imagine a world without light? Of course, without any light there would be no life. But what about light hidden, no direct light. Easy to imagine, we can just think back to those many grey days we recently experienced. A world without direct light would be pretty gray.

“You are the salt of the world, but if that salt has lost its saltiness, well then....You are the light of the world, but if that light is hidden, well then....”

The words of Jesus remind me of another text in the New Testament, written many years later. The text can be found in the book of Revelation, a letter actually written by an author by the name of John, who, being exiled to the island of Patmos, writes a letter to seven churches. Do you know the words of his letter to the church of Laodicea? “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (chapter 3: 15 – 16)

Is there anything more disappointing than looking forward to a hot bowl of soup on a cold wintry day to find it lukewarm? Or taking a drink of tea on a hot summer day after mowing the lawn to find it lukewarm? Ugh!

We hear today’s scripture, and rightfully so, as a reminder of the qualities of discipleship; that, as being followers of Jesus, we offer so much. Just like salt, we add flavor and richness in God’s good news of grace to days that might not seem special. We bring out the goodness of a people, just as salt brings out good flavor. Salt has healing power as does our faith. And like salt, we preserve the stories of our faith.

As disciples, we are light for the world; shining brightly to dim or diminish the many forms of darkness; the darkness of hatred, of violence, of poverty, of exclusion, a darkness that does not allow the rich colors of God’s children to be seen and celebrated. Our light allows for love to grow just as seedlings reach toward the light and grow.

Salt and light; the words of Jesus remind us that we have a place in the community of faith, not to just come in and fill a pew but to share and serve; to flavor up and shine in the world!

And the words of Jesus also, and perhaps instead of ‘also’ we should say foremost, remind us of covenant, of our connection with our God.

Rabbi Amy Jill Levine, orthodox Jew and New Testament scholar (I’ll let those two characteristics just sink in for a minute), has said that if one does not understand and know the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) then one cannot really understand or know Jesus and the writings of the New Testament. We in the Christian community so often want to separate the two. Some do; I remember one day when my son was in Middle School, there were some nicely dressed men across the street from the school handing out what he thought were candy bars. So, on his way to where I was sitting in the car he stopped by and as he turned to the car I read disappointment on his face. The freebies were not candy bars but Bibles, or ‘half bibles’ of Psalms and New Testament.

To understand the New Testament, one must know the Old Testament, to understand Jesus we must remember that he was a good Jew, that, as the gospel writer Matthew stated in our text, he was not in the world to abolish the law, to ‘trash’ the religion but to bring that to fulfillment, to reality on earth as it was in heaven. What was happening in the time? The people were being oppressed by the Roman Empire. There were divisions in the community. Some were called to side with the Zealots and take up arms in violent confrontation. Some groups of religious leaders thought that the best way of being was to form their own ghettos or communities isolated from others to best survive and preserve their own ways of being and faith. And Jesus begins to preach.

Remember, Jesus began the sermon last week, we gathered around on the mountaintop last week and heard his introduction, his words of blessing, what we often refer to as the Beatitudes or Sermon on the Mount. But last week’s reading was just the beginning and goes on for a few chapters and, likewise, a few Sundays!

Jesus goes up to a mountaintop, Matthew reminding the listeners of his connection with Moses, Jesus sits down, looks out over the disciples and those behind them and says, blessed are you and you and you, twelve verses of blessing. Then he says, ‘You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.’ And his listeners are reminded not just of their discipleship, not just of their role as people of faith; they are reminded of something that we oftentimes forget; they are reminded of covenant. “You are the salt of the earth vs. 13; In Judaism, salt was a symbol of covenant.” Reminding people of God’s faithfulness, God’s steadfast love that endures forever and calling them to keep that covenant as well, to be faithful to God, or the quality of their life would be diminished.

Likewise, Jesus called them ‘the light of the world’; we’ve heard that language before. We turn back pages and centuries to the prophet Isaiah who, in chapter 42, calls Israel to be as a light to the nations: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

Jesus is using words to remind the people who they are and whose they are and call them to live out that reality in the world. Remember people, remember that we have a God who has called us

into covenant, into relationship, a God who loves us, who has known us since our first breath, a God ready to forgive and redeem, a God of promise and redemption. Jesus, in these first words of salt and light is connecting them with their faith story, is connecting them to their God.

Because, without that connection, well, salt might just lose its flavor. Without that connection, light might shine oh so dim. In these beginning words of his sermon, Jesus reminds those of us sitting around about our call to discipleship but first and foremost, that that discipleship is rooted in a faith story of covenant with our God. How can we show the love if we don't feel the love?

Swiss American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross once wrote, "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."

We sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, our true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.

Jesus sits down on a mountaintop, gathers disciples around, blesses them and then reminds them of their light within. And reminds us of our light within. Reminds us of what gives salt its essence. Did you know that salt; sodium chloride, is almost impossible to break down? Only if you dilute it does it then turn into a powder and lose its flavor. Could this be another metaphor reminder, that when we are so pulled from left and right and 20,000 directions that we lose our center, when we become so diluted with our many directions that we lose our light from within, we lose not only our ability to shine but our flavor, our essence?

Salt and light. Yes, a call to discipleship. And also, a call to identity. To breathe deeply of that which is love which is life which is Holy in our lives. To nurture that light from within.

So, in addition to just words, I would like to try something more interactive. To actually nurture that light from within. I invite you to turn to someone close to you, not a member of your immediate family, and, if you don't know their name, first exchange names. Then covenant with that person that somehow, sometime and somehow this week you will hold them in prayer. Not for something specific, you can tell them what time and how many days if you want but primarily, just shine your light, let them know that you will pray for them this week. And then allow them to tell you the same. Know that you will be held in the light this week. Allow that light from within to be nurtured.

And now, as we receive the gift of music, take this time to remember your connection with the Holy. You may want to close your eyes, deep breaths. Soak in the light and the goodness that surrounds you now in community and surrounds you always. Replenish your light so that you may know that you are light and salt to the world.