

## Who We Are and What We Do (Salt & Light)

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9a and Matthew 5:13-20

On the table at the restaurant we ate at one time were the requisite salt and pepper shakers, although in post-COVID hindsight, even they can seem a little suspect. But there was something else on the table, alongside the sweetener packets in pink and yellow and blue and brown. Something called “saltless salt.” We knew what it meant, and nonetheless were amused by the label. “Saltless salt.”

Jesus quite emphatically did not want us to be saltless salt.

This morning the Sermon on the Mount continues, following the iconic words of the Beatitudes.

You are the salt of the earth. It perhaps meant more when he said it. Salt was a valued commodity. We had not yet made it one of the four food groups, along with sugar, fat and caffeine. It was more elemental than that.

In the biblical era, salt was a “recurrent motif in Jewish cultural and religious life.” Salt symbolized the making of a covenant. Because of its preservative qualities, salt was attributed with magical powers, affording protection against evil spirits and invoking hope for permanence and blessing. Newborns babies were rubbed with salt, and new homeowners were given the gift of bread with salt. (See *Jewish Heritage Online Magazine*)

But despite the curiosity of “saltless salt,” or our overuse of salt and the rise of “low salt” and “low sodium” everything, we get what Jesus means, do we not? We may not understand, with salt as such a common thing, its biblical mystical powers, but we know what use it has in our lives. It preserves. And it seasons. And we are called to do the same.

The preservation part is tricky and complex, particularly when it comes to faith. We don't want it simply to safeguard something that is dead and decaying. Rather, we want it to maintain and save that which is worth holding on to. Our core values. Our authentic practices.

One of my ongoing wonderments is the rapid evolution of culture and church. What from our tradition is worth passing on, needs passing on? We are asking that question around here a lot these days as we ponder staffing models and the vision that drives them. What do we want to let go of, old habits and customs that are holding us back and weighing us down as we move ahead? And what do we want to hold onto and preserve as we enter this new world? What beliefs and practices are absolutely essential as we inch forward?

How do we think about preservation and progress, using this gift of salt? What it looks like may differ. But that it reflects timeless values, those things worth preserving, is absolutely essential.

And seasoning. You are the salt of the earth, Jesus said. How do we season? What do we season? How can our lives enhance the lives of others, make a difference in the particular lives of those with whom we connect, and then, banding and bonding with others, make a difference in the broader world? Jesus insists that we can make such a difference.

I am not a culinary expert, so I don't know if salt can become stale, as he suggests. But I know that it can go unused, sitting in a cupboard. We know, from watching endless cooking shows, that every recipe begins with a little salt, and that a little salt is added in the end. Just the right amount to make a difference. Just the right amount to bring out the best flavor.

Our lives can be like that. Our lives are like that. Bringing out the best flavor in others, in a community. Let this image work itself out in your imagination just a bit. Seasoning. In our lives as spouses and partners, as parents, as daughters and sons, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors and co-workers. How might we season, give flavor?

How might we season, give flavor, to life around this place? We are on the continuous flight path of post-COVID emergence. People are coming back. Guests are joining us for the first time, and then returning. How might your gifts, your commitments, your “saltiness,” or the “saltiness” of the person to your left or right, give flavor to the life of this place?

Jesus is not saying that we have the ability to be salt, to preserve, to season. He says that we have it in us already. How do we exercise that gift, in offering comfort, in sharing hope, in loving those who need loved, a child, an elder, someone lonely or bereaved?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this: “You are the salt –’ not: You should be the salt! It is not for the disciples to decide whether they are or are not to be the salt. They are the salt. Nor is any appeal made to them to be the salt of the earth. They are the salt, whether they want to be or not, in the power of the call they have encountered...Bonhoeffer concludes: “Those who have been called by Jesus and stand in his discipleship are, through precisely that call, the salt of the earth in their entire existence.” (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

For us, then, there is no such thing as saltless salt, no low-salt diet, no salt substitute. We have been given gifts, the gift, to preserve what matters and to season, to give full flavor, to a broken and fearful world. Not to use that gift is unthinkable to Jesus. To use it, to use it faithfully and joyfully, will make us worth our salt, will make all the difference, in our lives, and in the life of the world into which we have been called.

Then he said this: “You are the light of the world.” You don’t light a light and then hide it, putting it under a bushel. Apparently, we do that. “Let your light shine,” he says. Let what you do, what you believe, be seen by others, by the world.

In some ways, Jesus is talking about evangelism here, the dreaded E word. Not in-your-face, convert or die evangelism. We are shy and polite or unsure and don’t want to be intrusive. I am right there with you. But what would it look like for our faith to have a radiating quality, to let what happens here – worship, service, connection – to be shared with friends and neighbors and co-workers? Simply

letting our light shine by sharing what happens in our faith and why it matters. A different kind of evangelism, authentic, with integrity, reflecting Jesus' hopes for us. Let your light shine. What would that look like?

John Brokhoff writes that there are four things that light can do.

*>Light is radiant.*

A light is best when it directs our attention to something else, a work of art or a pathway. Our glow reflects and directs. Think how you can be light to someone who is searching, grieving, questioning, not to provide answers so much, but to provide a presence that radiates light and love.

*>Light is insight into the meaning of life.*

There was, and is, a movement within our Presbyterian family called More Light. The More Light movement focuses its work on full equality for all in the church, particularly around sexual orientation and gender identity. Centuries ago, a minister named John Robinson said that God has *yet more light* to bring into the world. Light brings insight. More light brings more insight.

*>Light is hope in a despairing world.*

Our family likes lighthouses. We have driven miles and miles off the beaten path to find a lighthouse. Think about a sailor who is lost, or anyone who is lost, physically or spiritually. Think how we can be as lighthouses to them, providing hope, a sense of direction, a beacon in the darkness.

*>Light is service in terms of good works.*

When we share our time on behalf of someone else, our light radiates to where there is need.

That is where we might be most clearly called these days as a congregation, to radiate hope and illumination where there are particular forms of darkness. The prophet Isaiah criticizes performative religion, , fancy, showy religion, the trappings of piety. Let the oppressed go free, Isaiah says. Share your food. House the unhoused, even in your own home. "Then your light shall break forth like the

dawn,” the prophet says, not by the excellence of your “churchiness,” but by the integrity of your service to those in need. That’s what Matthew 25 is about – poverty and race and education and gun violence.

How do images of light help us? How do we draw attention to complex problems? How do we illuminate difficult questions that are more easily avoided? How do we comprehend, first ourselves, and then help others to comprehend? How do we bring light to where God’s blessed and beloved children are hurting and make a difference?

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during World War II, a leader in the Confessing Church that challenged Hitler and the perverted notion that Nazism was somehow based on Christian principles. Niemoller preached a sermon in 1936 just before being arrested, about the “‘Ye are the light of the world’: we hear these words,” Niemoller preached, “and are reminded by them that we worry about something that ceases to exist in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. What are we worrying about? It is not your business to worry about whether the light is extinguished or not by the (wind.)’ We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is His concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away.”

*We are only to see that the light is not hidden away.* Illuminating Nazism might be an extreme. It may not. What I do know is that we have been blessed with a counter-cultural blessing that gives us the only credential that we will ever need. And what I know as well is that Jesus calls us to be salt and light, and empowers us to preserve and season and radiate and illuminate and shine. Where that takes us is up to us. That it *will* make a difference – there is no question about it. So, pass the salt. And remember that old song – “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.” Amen.