

“Learning to Live: Knowing Who We Are”

Salt becomes an important issue this time of year — will there be enough of it? Road crews dispense it on the highways and byways at a record pace as snowstorm after snowstorm flies across our area. It got so bad that in one community (and I can’t remember which one because I was only sort of watching the news at that point) they were talking about increasing the ratio of beet juice to be spread on their roads.

On the radio one morning someone was questioning what’s the big deal; we have salt mine just under Lake Erie — get it out here! One of the newsmen (“news personalities”?) informed that caller that the trucks were lined up end-to-end at the gate of that mine and they were grinding it out as fast as possible. Truckloads are delivered every week to ODOT and municipal public works barns — and this morning it was evident that Macedonia has salt but is not quite sure how to apply it.

Salt has always been an important issue. In ancient times, salt was such a valued commodity that Roman soldiers were often paid in salt (it’s how we get the word “salary”). Salt was used to preserve and to cook food — not just to flavor it (although that remains a primary use); most cooking was (is?) done in ovens that were fueled by dry animal dung and adding salt to the mixture helped to stabilize the concoction and make it burn more evenly. Salting food like fish made it possible to eat through times when food was scarce; salt cod to this day is considered by some as a delicacy (not an opinion I share, but there it is). Here endeth the cooking section of our program.

So what does Jesus mean when he tells us ***“You are the salt of the earth . . .”*** Are we flavoring? Preservative? Dung additive? (Probably not pavement clearer!) The answer lies in the words that follow — only those words are quite confusing — ***“. . . but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”***

There are two problems here: As translated, it makes no sense; salt does

not lose its taste. To be sure if you add enough water to a teaspoon of salt it will eventually become so depleted that you may not sense much saltiness . . . but boil off that water, the saltiness is as poignant as before. The problem (once again) is translation. Jesus asks “. . . if salt μωρανθη (moravthay) in what way αλισθησεται (alithayseti)”? Only one verb in that: “to salt” — *“in what way will it salt?”* The issue is μωρανθη which in most settings would be translated “foolish” (the root is “moron”).

So what can it mean to say that salt could become “foolish”? If it becomes tainted — something gets mixed in that makes the salt no longer effective and maybe even dangerous: a couple of drops of strychnine wouldn’t matter much, would it? Or how about just six parts per million of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol? (That’s what was in the water in West Virginia nine years ago. Six parts per million was considered “safe” — not from my tap!)

Salt can be tainted by chemicals, sand, sugar (Hold on! Sugar? Yes. Try baking something that calls for a teaspoon of salt and add a teaspoon that is half-sugar and it will ruin the recipe). “Tainted” does not necessarily mean “dangerous;” it means that something has happened to make it unfit for its original intent.

So *“You are the salt of the earth . . .”* That’s a phrase that has come to mean that a person is a straight-shooter, a good apple, a regular guy, not flighty or dishonest, a good egg (have I left out any clichés?). Now, we have to examine if that is what Jesus means — and the answer is, *“Not really.”*

First, I think that Jesus is talking not about where salt comes from but where it needs to be applied — our hymn lyric, to be sung in a few moments, has it right *“You are salt for the earth, O people.”* That is, we all have an important task in flavoring, preserving, and leavening the world around us. This is much more than just your personal reputation as one who can be counted on; this is your calling to bring the Gospel into the world where it can do its work of redeeming, saving, and restoring.

But more than that, Jesus goes on to tell us, “***You are the light of the world.***” There is little confusion about this; we all know what light does — it eradicates darkness. Jesus tells us that if you put a light “***on the lampstand, . . . it gives light to all in the house.***” Under ideal conditions, your eyes can see the flame of a single candle from a distance of about three and a half miles. Light is powerful against darkness; and Jesus is letting us know that such power is ours. But it is a power that doesn’t seem all that powerful — and such is the power of the Gospel.

Now, Jesus is not just speaking about any and all light. First, in the Gospel of John Jesus tells us “***I am the light of the world.***” but He had prefaced that remark with this: “***As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.***” [9:5] So, now that Jesus has left this world, the light function is ours to assume.

But not just light in general, so everyone can look at whatever she or he wishes; no, our light has a direct purpose: “***so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.***” Hence, our light does not just shine, it radiates from within; it is the natural by-product of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The light of Christ in us is not intended to stay in us, keeping us all toasty warm; it is to radiate from us so that others see and feel the power of that light.

Please note that Jesus does not say, “*If you want to become salt and light, do this . . .*” or, “*before I’ll call you salt and light, I’ll need to see this from you . . .*” Rather, He says both simply and directly, “***You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.***” It is, as with last week’s Beatitudes, sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning. This is not about performance; this is about identity — which is all grace and all gift.

Does this put Jesus in direct conflict with the Law? Why bring that up? Because Jesus does. He says: “***Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.***” To “abolish” [καταλυω kataluo] means “to tear it apart, to loosen it;” it is

the opposite of “building up” [οικοδομῶ oikodomeo]. In Matthew's Gospel, the verb is several times used in reference to the temple (cf. Matthew 24:2; 26:61; 27:40).

Unlike the Law, Jesus exclaims about the temple, “***Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down***” (24:2). Jesus claims that this was not his intention with respect to the Law. But Jesus does not say that he has come to “build up” the Law but rather to “fulfill” it. “To fulfill” [πληροῶ playroho] is frequently understood as “bringing something to an end” or “to complete (something)” but that does not quite fit here. I think Jesus is here saying, “*I have come to fill the Law full,*” that is, to give it its fullest meaning.

What might that look like? Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus is not wedding Himself to the notion that it is possible for one to observe all 613 regulations the lawyers had determined were in the Torah. He is wedding Himself to the notion that the Law provides for us more than rules and directives; it provides for us a pathway to follow that leads us into the heart of God.

As we will see next week, Jesus will begin to offer up new ways of looking at old laws that reflect what He is doing in the world. In some cases, Jesus' view will seem almost lax; in other cases it will appear quite severe. In every case it will reflect what Jesus Himself reflected: the will of God. For now, we will listen to these words of Jesus on the subject of the impact and import of the Law: “ . . . ***unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***” (I'll have much more to say about that in two weeks.)

Now, before I can even begin to think I am bringing this to a close, I need to come back to something I said earlier. Jesus does not bid us to become salt and light; He affirms you are salt and light. That's a given; Jesus said it, and whether you believe it or not, it's true. But believing it is much, much better than not believing.

So here's my challenge of the week: I realize that you may have a hard time believing that we are good, worthy, and lovable and therefore will perhaps you nod politely when I call you salt and light but do not really believe it. While I think this is true of all ages, I think it's especially true of adults! We know ourselves too well; moreover, we believe our pastors are nice people paid to say these kinds of nice things! For this reason, I need to actually show you that you are, in fact, salt and light.

So I challenge you to start a "Salt & Light Log." Really. Start to collect examples of where God has worked through you to help someone else. Now, I warn you: this may be difficult for many of us who were taught never to boast (or, more accurately, we were taught that saying anything good about ourselves publicly *is* boasting). So you may need some convincing that you really need this log to do anything. You can practice by pointing out where you see someone else being salt or light, but I encourage you also to look within to see where God is using you as salt and light, too.

This is how we learn to live. We listen to Jesus and we take what we hear and begin to put it to work in daily living. There are two traps into which we Christians all too often fall: 1) Secularism — when we think and act just like the world around us. 2) Legalism — when we think that rules will keep us safe and give us standing before God. Jesus is coming at both of those traps in this Sermon on the Mount.

He wants us to know who we are — all those “blesseds” in the Beatitudes and today “salt” and “light.” It's who you are, not so much what you do, that is at the heart of Jesus. Do not take that as a laissez-faire attitude or Jesus saying, “*Oh well. Kids will be kids.*” Hear Him: “*. . . whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*”

Did you catch it? Any Good News there? Lawbreakers and law doers both are said to be “*in the kingdom of heaven.*” Your identity is not

dependent on your behaviors. But when you know who you are and live out that identity, great joy, great power, great excitement, great blessings to those around you follow.

There will be more in the coming weeks on these concerns of secularism and legalism. Suffice it now to say that we are given ample opportunity to salt the world around us and reflect the light of Christ. Be salt. Open yourself to God working through you to touch the lives of others with His love and care. You are salt. Be light. Shine with the joy and radiance of Christ's love for you and others until you become positively luminescent. You are light.

Shine! And . . . Shake it!

Amen.