

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Salty Ones”

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Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Labels can serve a useful purpose. They help us to identify just who we really are. They can help us know where we fit and where we might not want to fit in quite so well. Most, if not all of us are proud to wear certain labels that identify our allegiance with things we honor. We carry the labels of our families, our work, our sports teams, our nation, and our religion.

Yet labels can be a bad thing. Labels become a way in which we judge others quickly and take actions from those judgments. You are a conservative or a liberal. You are a Republican or a Democrat. You are a Catholic or a Protestant. You are a jock or a geek. You are maize and blue or you are green and white. It is sometimes tragic that labels prevent us from seeing the real person behind the label.

A former colleague of mine served a rather long interim ministry with a rural church. The people of that congregation seemed to really enjoy their time with him. They were very sorry to see him go. When he approached his final Sunday, the church gave him a huge party. Because he was a single man, along with other gifts they showered him with canned goods. And because he was a man with a good sense of humor, as a practical joke they first removed the labels from the cans. Thus, he could not tell by looking at the outside what each can contained. I could only imagine the amused frustration that he felt when he opened a certain can to check the contents, in search of something else that he really needed to prepare a meal. Someone told him at the time, “I hope that you have lots of Tupperware to store your mistakes!”

Today in our Scripture lesson, you and I are given a label, an identity, a purpose. In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke directly to his disciples and consequently to his contemporary followers. He first talked about God's blessing for the suffering, the poor, the hungry, and the mourning- the Beatitudes. Then Jesus seemed to point more personally and directly at his followers and say, "Blessed are you when they revile you, persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my behalf. That's the way they treated the prophets before you." In such a blessing Jesus indicated that he believed that his followers were supposed to live in risk in order to fully participate in the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You. You people. You are the ones. I am relying upon you."

I wonder if that rag-tag group of followers around him that day could understand. I know it is difficult for me to understand the label could possibly fit me. I feel hardly qualified. I am not Superman. I do not have the courage of a modern Isaiah, John the Baptist or Martin Luther King. You are the salt of the earth. You. You. You. Yet there is no getting away from whom Jesus means here.

Alyce McKenzie says that Jesus' remarks are like handing us a nametag and a job description and then telling us we are running the company. It seems so beyond our humble means. Yet it is clear it is what he expects us to do. Jesus did not say that his followers ought to be the salt of the earth. He said that we are the salt of the earth. He did not ask us to become something different, to earn a new label or to be something we are not. He simply demanded that we be who we are supposed to be. And being implies doing, acting, and standing for what we believe.

Salt of the earth. Of course we know that salt strengthens the flavor of food. It seasons. It hides the bitter taste. It enhances the flavor already there. Those who must limit their salt intake know well how bland everything tastes without salt. Sometimes nothing, not even chocolate, can satisfy my taste for the salty goodness of a potato chip.

Those of us in Michigan also know the value of salt in melting the ice and snow upon our roads. When the salt trucks are not on our icy roads, we cry and complain. We worry about whether or not we will have enough of the precious substance to last the winter. Salt is warmth and heat in a rock form.

In earlier times, before refrigeration, salt was a preservative. It gave food vital storage time to be used by families in the regular diet. In ancient times, during the era of Jesus' audience, salt was rubbed on newborn children to welcome them to the world. It was tossed to seal legal agreement and covenants between people. It was sprinkled on sacrifices offered to all sorts of gods. It was thought of as a metaphor for wisdom. Clearly there was precedent for salt to be associated with the power of the divine. Salt was something that was both blessed by God and intended by God to be offered as a blessing for others.

Salt of the earth. Followers of Jesus, you and I. It is interesting that when Jesus labeled us he used something so insignificant and so small. He did not say that we were a great army ready to take over the world. He said that we are the salt of the world. Tiny grains, taken for granted. Yet if we sprinkle a few of us around in places like your neighborhood and mine, there is no telling what we might stir up. There is no telling what flavor we might bring.

Jesus tells us that we are to bring the seasoning of God's goodness to all. Perhaps we came from a time and place in which Christianity was so familiar that it did not stand out at all. There was no need to worry about adding God's salt because we just assumed things were always salty enough. But now it is different. Times have changed. In the face of our culture we may feel smaller and more insignificant. We may believe we are a few grains of salt in a vast, secular stew of bland indifference. Perhaps we need to be reminded of the power of our potential. Jesus reminds us of our distinctive capacity to make a difference, to rattle the status quo, and to seek to show justice and mercy toward others in the face of hopelessness.

Thomas Long writes that "the church, for all of its vision, is overpowered, outnumbered, and often overlooked." He says that the challenge of the salt of the earth is for "a small group trying with mixed results to live out an alternative life, set down in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands them... The hardest part is not in being Christian for a day, but in being faithful day after day."

Several years ago, a woman in one of my previous churches had a son who was having trouble in his dorm at college, trouble related to the use of alcohol by other students. There were issues of noise, property destruction, violence, and threats surrounding those who abusing alcohol, even while under age. The boy started a campaign for establishing alcohol free floors in each dorm. He took his message to student government, to the campus newspaper, and finally to the board of regents. Some students didn't like his plan. They seemed to think that if he was successful, the entire college might be declared dry. His advocacy was a threat. But the young man persisted. Other students joined his cause. Parents wrote letters to legislators. Eventually the university set up an entire dorm that was alcohol free. The next year the demand for rooms in that dorm was more than the number of rooms available. Today such floors and dorms are common on most campuses.

Someone once said, "Followers of Christ are not to test the waters, but to make waves." In a world where there often appears to be no values, anything who believes anything is perceived as a threat. Anyone who has a vision for the future is frightening for those enslaved to the status quo. Anybody who takes a stand, makes those of us who buy into the culture a bit more uncomfortable. Richard Lovelace, in speaking about discipleship said, "We may need to challenge more and comfort less." We are the salt of the earth. The purpose of salt is sometimes to bite, bringing healing to the open wounds caused by separation from God.

You are the salt of the earth. It is a great gift to know that our life is caught up in the very bringing about of the Kingdom of God. We are to be the flavor of the brought into our world. We are to be that which preserves the holiness of God against the powers of the darkness. We are to be the zest and bite which challenges the comfortable. We are to be the sacred blessing of the divine in the midst of ordinary life. We are to be the way Jesus is seasoning the world today, changing the taste of the ways things are to be.