

Being What You Are

My mother loved salt. At every meal, she kept the salt shaker handy. And she sprinkled copious amounts of salt on her food. After she ate something sweet, she craved something salty, like pretzels or nuts. She used so much salt that we, her family, became concerned that it might have an adverse effect on her health, especially as she grew older. But she was determined to use it, and eventually we figured out why.

My mother's father was a Methodist minister who served as a missionary in China. My mother was *born* in China, long before the time of electric refrigeration. In the China of that day, salt was used extensively as a preservative. So all through my mother's growing-up years, the food she ate was heavily salted. To her, that was how food was supposed to taste.

Today we use salt not so much to preserve as to flavor. We take salt for granted, don't we? It's inexpensive and it's plentiful. But salt hasn't always been as readily available as it is today. During Gandhi's non-violent movement for independence

from British rule, he led a march to the sea to gather tax-free salt for India's poor.

And in the ancient world, salt was a valuable commodity. Merchants carried it on salt routes to sell in countries where it was scarce. And Roman soldiers were paid in salt—that's why our English word *salary* comes from the same root word as *salt*.

Salt was used in sacrifices. And biblical covenants were *sealed* with salt. A covenant of salt was a permanent covenant, a covenant of loyalty and fidelity. For salt, by its very nature, is unadulterated. Pure.

Salt has value not only as a preservative and as a flavoring, but as a symbol of lasting purity.

And Jesus says that *you are the salt of the earth*. These words of Jesus come near the beginning of his best-known sermon: the one the church calls the Sermon on the Mount. He's just finished blessing those who walk in the ways of God's reign. Jesus has just finished blessing the pure in heart. And that helps us understand where he's going with this metaphor of salt.

You're salty, says Jesus. You're pure. You're authentic. So keep on being pure. Keep on being authentic. Keep on being salt

for the world. As the Letter to the Colossians reminds us, everything we say should be graciously seasoned with saltiness.

Salt seasons. But salt has no function in and of itself. Salt's purpose is to purify and preserve and flavor other things. We salty disciples of Jesus exist for others, exist to pour ourselves out into a world in need. But—Jesus cautions—be careful. Don't let the tasteless claims of the world cause you to lose your savor or dilute your saltiness. Because you are salt-of-the-earth people!

But that's not all Jesus wants you to know today. Today he tells you that *you are the light of the world!*

Did you know that in order to produce light, salt is needed? I didn't know that. But according to Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori: "Salts...are merely charged particles, ions, that generate some (re)action. Whether it's the fiery energy of the sun, the light from a battery or an outlet, or even the light from a firefly, the ways we know of producing light depend on something salty."

If we are the light of the world—and Jesus himself says we are!—we have to be salty.

A great salty ocean rolls along our state's coastline and far beyond. When we go to the beach, we know we're getting close when we catch the sea breeze's wonderfully salty scent. We breathe it in. If we go for a swim, we taste salt water. It gets in our mouths and in our eyes.

But even if we never visit the beach, salt is in our bodies. Saltiness is within us. It's part of our human make-up. But we don't produce our own saltiness. We're not *capable* of producing our own saltiness.

And without modern conveniences like matches to strike and switches to flip, it wouldn't be easy for us to produce *light*, either. Not any easier than it's been for human creatures throughout most of history.

Salt and light are gifts, gifts from the creation and from the Creator. The Source of all good gifts has fashioned us to be both salty and luminous.

You and I hear good news this morning! In his sermon, Jesus doesn't say: you *could* be salt. He doesn't say: you *might* be light. No. He makes it plain. You *are* salt. You *are* light. *Be what you are*, Jesus urges. You bear the image of God. Be true to your self. Be true to the goodness that's in you.

You are the light of the world. And the world has never needed that light more than it does today. When many of you—and I—were growing up, we lived in a Christian society. Home and church—and school—collaborated to make it that way.

My fourth-grade teacher, Miss Laura Jett, was a good and faithful Methodist. She taught us hymns from her hymnal. In our public school classroom! If she were teaching today, Miss Jett probably wouldn't be permitted to do that, due to a nuanced interpretation of the meaning of separation of church and state. In the last fifty years, Christianity has once again become counter-cultural.

But we continue to gather as a community of faith. Every time we do, we pray for God's will to be done. We pray for God's good purposes to be accomplished and God's instruction to be followed. Today we hear Jesus' words concerning the law—which he's come not to do away with, but to complete. And at the very heart of this law he preaches about are the two greatest commandments: to love God and to love the neighbor.

Jesus insists that if we truly want God's law of love to be obeyed—if we truly want God's perfect will to be done—we have to let it be known to others. That's where our salty

seasoning comes in. And that's when we let our light become a beacon that casts a glow into the darkest corners of this world.

But just how do we do this? Isaiah makes it clear. His words of prophecy are explicit: *Loose the bonds of injustice. Stop exploitation. Let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry. Give warm clothes to the cold and the shivering. Bring the homeless poor into your house. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. Your light shall rise in the darkness.*

But your light can't shine if you conceal it. Jesus, who faced ridicule and scorn, knows that *you* may face these, too. You may be tempted to keep a low profile. You may be tempted to stay hidden within these walls. But, beloved, resist that temptation. Throw off that bushel basket! Let your light shine! Let it be seen! Put it up on the lampstand.

When I was in seminary, a fun event took place at lunchtime once or twice a month. It was called *Līve at the Lampstand*. It took its name from these words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. At *Līve at the Lampstand*, divinity school students brought brown-bag lunches and gathered around as classmates and even faculty members entertained, sharing their

gifts, their faith, and their witness in songs and skits, in poetry and comedy. They put their light on the lampstand.

Because they knew—and we know—that the purpose of light is not to be seen in and of itself. The purpose of light is to let other things be seen. Does your light let Christ be seen?

In this season of light, Christ Jesus speaks to his disciples. To you. To all of us. To his church. *You're the salt of the earth! You're the light of the world!* You don't need to try harder to be salt and light, because you already are. That's the way you've been designed, by your God of measureless grace.

Today you are invited to the Table of Grace. Today you are invited to come to the table with gratitude for the grace you'll receive there, the grace that will fill you there. And to give thanks that this week—through you—the light of God's grace and God's love may shine in the life of someone who would never have known them, were it not for you being exactly what you are. For by being what you are, you give glory to the One who has created you.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.