

Being a Salty Christian
Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-20
February 5, 2017
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

Today we are going to talk about salt. In our time, we usually think of it as a seasoning agent for our food. In the past, it has played an even more important role. The first roads were built to transport salt. The Roman soldiers were paid in salt. It is still used to cure foods like salt pork and salt cod. We cannot live without it. We get salt in a number of ways. I love the relatively useless facts I find when doing sermon research. Here is one. On average, a person takes in the equivalent of 266 shakes of a salt shaker. I enjoy watching cooking competitions on the Food Network. One sure way to get “Chopped” is to inadequately salt the food. No good cook would think to leave a box of salt next to the stove without opening it and think the food would be adequately seasoned. The salt needs to be used in the process – mixed in to be flavorful.

In today’s gospel, we also hear about light. Jesus calls the people the light of the world. Our lightbulbs are measured in candle power. A single candle doesn’t provide a lot of light, but in a dark room it is adequate for seeing well enough to get where we are going. Light has great power, though. We can concentrate it and use it for burning, cutting, and healing in the form of a laser. Salt and light are both necessary for us to live. They are no mere trifle. We are told we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The writer of Matthew asks the question, “If salt loses its flavor, how can it be restored?” Here is another of those useless facts. The idea of salt losing its flavor is depicted by the Greek word, *moronos*, the word from which we get our word, “moron.” It really doesn’t mean anything about losing flavor. That is just what the translators came up with. In reality, the verse reads, “If salt becomes foolish, how can it be made wise again?” Or, “How do you salt the salt again?” The gospel writer says you just throw it out and trample it under foot.

There are times when we are more or less salty. There are times when we are brighter or dimmer. That is what Isaiah is talking about. We need to put this in chronological sequence. Isaiah 58 is after the people have returned from exile in Babylon. Remember what the prophets are always doing and saying – the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the minor ones like Micah, Amos, and Malachi. They tell the people, “Look, folks. You’ve missed the point here. You have to care for the widows, the children, and the aliens in your midst. You are not taking care of the people on the margins. You are not taking care of those who have been left out. If you don’t do that, bad things will happen.” Sometimes the people turn back to God and do what is right and sometimes they don’t. The Babylonian exile happened because they did not heed the warnings of the prophets.

They have been in exile. They come back and they want to get it right. As a result, they make sure to worship correctly. They follow all the rules. They come to the temple once it is rebuilt. They even fast.

Fasting isn't a whole lot of fun. Who wants to be hungry? They find that, even with all this, their prayers aren't being answered. They start to complain. Boy do they complain! We know that going all the way back to being with Moses in the desert, they are good at complaining. (So are we). They say, "We are doing all the right things and God simply isn't coming through. Just yesterday I asked for whatever, and God didn't give it to me." It is that "Great Santa Claus in the Sky" approach to prayer. We ask for it and gifts mysteriously come down the chimney. They are upset. Isaiah, as the voice of God says, "You're fasting. Great! You're doing all those things according to the rules. Then, as soon as you leave, you start bickering and fighting among one another. You exploit your workers. You do not take care of the poor. That is the fast that *counts*. It is not working for Me. "

Our bishop talks about people who are "pew potatoes" – a take-off on couch potatoes. They come to worship and sit there every week, but do not live out their faith through the week. I know how much people in this congregation do. I realize that we are not pew potatoes. However, I am one of those people who have the title of "religious professional." Yes, I'm paid to be a Christian. Oh boy! How well do I do? It's confession time. Sometimes I take the easy way out; sometimes I'm not very salty and not very bright. Sometimes I decided, "You know, I'm just not there today. I'm going to have to phone this one in today." I think we all live there to some extent. The challenge is, how do we fast (maybe not literally) in a way God recognizes and honors.

We have a group that will be getting together for a day soon in which we will talk about where we have been, what we do well, and where our congregation's ministry will go in the next many months and years. We will be casting a vision based on our past strengths and our future needs and the needs of the world around us. It would be easier for us to do a physical fast. When we look at the facts, 840 million people in the world are malnourished. That is three times the number of people living in North America. 25,000 people around the world die of hunger every day. One in five children in the US go to bed hungry. The city of Milwaukee has the august honor of being the worst city in the United States in which to raise a black child. Obviously, we have work to do and we are responsible. Remember the old Cane and Abel story, and the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" We are our brother's and sister's keeper.

We are doing a lot of things. We are doing a lot about hunger in our city: the jello buckets, the bag lunches, the muffins, the milk, the quarterly meal at Summerfield UMC. There are some people who are absolutely dedicated to making that all happen. But, we are never going to arrive at doing all that can be done. More people can be drawn in. Sometimes things change and we move in new directions. We know that we *can* make a difference.

If you have been anything other than a hermit these past few weeks, you know that our world is a pretty contentious place to live right now. The politics have gotten out of hand. I have to say I got into it with a family member, a cousin that I don't even know very well. I took the bait and I got beat up a bit, and that's okay. We know there is stuff going on in the world, but taking the bait was a stupid thing to do because it wasted time and energy that could have been used to do something positive. I'm not saying you shouldn't have opinions and shouldn't do something about them. I'm saying that whatever you choose to do about those opinions should result in something worthwhile. If you don't like what is going

on, contact your alderperson, your common council member, your state senator or representative, or your US representative or senator. Make it known what you like and what you dislike. As a church, there will be public policies that come up that are against who we are as Christian people and we have to gather around those issues. But it is so easy for us to go to Coffee Hour and there is a group of supporters of one political leaning at one table, the other political leaning at another, and a table of supporters of both sides of an issue who actually think they are going to change someone's mind. Good luck with that! Instead of spending our time doing that, let's spend our time doing what Isaiah calls us to do; let's spend our time doing what Matthew calls us to do. Let's be light. Let's be salt, and let us not be *moronos*. Amen.