

WORTHY OF OUR SALT AS JESUS' DISCIPLES

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You are the salt of the earth! Let me put it in more familiar terms: Y'all are the salt of the earth! You see, it's not just about your individual Christian life.

In light of that, let me be even more clear in my rendering of Jesus' words: **All y'all** are the salt of the earth! Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount are not meant for everybody, everywhere, in every time and place (even though the world would be a better place if everybody, everywhere, in every time and place [including all of us] would live the way Jesus describes and expects). Instead, Jesus' teachings are for those of us who claim to be his disciples, but at the same time wonder what, exactly, it means to be disciples of Jesus. So, once again, **all y'all** are the salt of the earth!

About eighteen months ago, I was diagnosed with a condition called orthostatic hypotension. In simple terms, it means I can get very dizzy and disoriented (even pass out occasionally) when I stand up after sitting too long or get dehydrated after exercising. My legs don't pump enough blood quickly enough to my brain sometimes. My usual low blood pressure contributes to the problem. After my cardiologist thoroughly checked me out, he told me what to do and how to be aware of the symptoms. Then he laughed and said, "You're the only patient your age I have that I will prescribe using more salt in your food!"

My father had heart attacks in April and July of my senior year in high school. My mother immediately began cooking with no salt. Nancy and I have never used salt in our cooking, for a number of reasons. So, despite the green light from my cardiologist to use more salt, it's really hard to do. I find that a little bit of salt goes a long way!

Even though we know that too much or too little salt can cause all sorts of problems, we love our salt, and salt is necessary for life. Besides, salt enhances the foods we eat, not by masking the flavor (unless you use too much), but by coaxing out and complementing the flavors that already exist. And, yet, we take salt for granted, don't we? After all, most of us grew up with a round blue box of salt with the little girl and her umbrella and the slogan, "When it rains, it pours."

Did you know that salt was scarce and, therefore, highly valued in many ancient societies? Salt was used to prepare and preserve meat and fish before refrigeration. Armies and explorers depended on salt to preserve food supplies in their campaigns and voyages. Just as the Silk Roads connected Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, Salt Roads developed as a result of the salt trade. In fact, our word "salary"

comes from the Latin word *salarium* which meant either a Roman soldier's allotment of salt or his monetary allowance to buy salt.

If you say someone is the "salt of the earth," that is a compliment. He or she is down to earth, reliable, dependable, honest, good people. But, in light of the fact that Jesus wasn't talking to everybody, everywhere, in all times and places — and in light of the historical information about the value of salt — and in light of the fact that salt is not only necessary for life itself, but also spices up life and enhances the flavors that are already there — maybe we can hear Jesus' words — "You are the salt of the earth" — with new ears.

- * You are the salt of the earth.
- * You are necessary for life.
- * You are valuable.
- * Your job is to enhance life that is dull and lifeless.

And what happens if salt doesn't live up to its saltiness and do its job? Well, it's not good for much of anything. Apparently, chemically, salt can't technically lose its saltiness. But if it's diluted or mixed in with white sand or fouled, salt can't do its salt thing, and has to be discarded.

Think about how that applies to your life and mine — and our life together — as disciples of Jesus. As disciples of Jesus, do we bring the life of Christ to the life of this world? Do our actions on behalf of Jesus make us distinctive? Do our lives, with Jesus Christ living and working through us, enhance the lives of people around us?

Or have our salty disciple lives lost their saltiness? Which, according to Jesus, means they don't have much use any more — at least when it comes to bearing witness to Jesus Christ, bringing glory to God, and spreading the values of God's kingdom here on earth.

Jesus also said, "All y'all are the light of the world!" You may remember that Jesus called himself "the light of the world," and went on to say, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) So which is it? Is Jesus the light of the world or are we the light of the world? And the answer is, Yes! The light that shines from us is the light of Christ shining through us. We can only reflect the light of Christ to others.

You already know that lighthouses use technology to magnify a bit of light and shine it great distances. One significant lighthouse invention was the Fresnel lens, developed in 1822. Numerous prisms magnified the single light in the lighthouse and the light was broadcast up to twenty miles.¹ That's a pretty good illustration of our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ: we reflect the light of Christ and, through the numerous

prisms of all y'all's lives, the light and love of Christ are magnified and broadcast far and wide.

Remember, when Jesus told those folks by the mountain, "All y'all are the salt of the earth and the light of the world," he was speaking declarative sentences. He didn't say, "One day, if y'all work real hard, y'all will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world" or "If y'all follow the law perfectly and never mess up, y'all will eventually become the salt of the earth and the light of the world." Instead, he said, "Y'all **are** the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

But just how seriously do we take Jesus' description (and demand) of us? This week I came across some interesting thoughts about how we so often deny and fail to live out Jesus' description and expectations of us as his disciples. Hear these words: "Thomas Merton wrote, 'Pride is a stubborn insistence of being what we are not and never were intended to be. Pride is a deep, insatiable need for unreality, an exorbitant demand that others believe the lie we have made ourselves believe about ourselves.' There is a tremendous temptation to be something other than what Jesus has told us that we are. Not content to be salt, many in our day want their life in Christ to be more spicy and exotic. Many of us would rather be the curry of the earth, or the cinnamon, or the turmeric; something entertaining to worldly palates. Not content to light a fallen world, we often settle for being a kind of cell phone flashlight that illumines only the next step in our own particular journey through the darkness. It is far too big a task to light the world after all, so we settle for hiding the light of Christ in ourselves and directing only to our own ends. These decisions not to be who we really are as disciples of Jesus are indeed prideful. Like salt with no flavor or light kept hidden we find ourselves diluted, and diminished by our own discontent with what Jesus calls us to be."²

Maybe being the salt of the earth and the light of the world is starting to sound more enticing! But then we come to some of the hardest words of Jesus in all of the gospels: "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." (Matthew 5:19-20)

Can Jesus actually be serious? Does he really mean what he says here about our righteousness exceeding that of the Jewish religious leaders of his day? That requirement is just a notch below the other seemingly impossible standard Jesus sets in his Sermon on the Mount, when he says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

Actually, with these expectations, Jesus sets us free. He sets us free from getting so caught up in meeting the letter of the law that we forget about the needs of the people we are dealing with. He sets us free from keeping score (which we inevitably do)

and comparing ourselves to others (“Well, I’m not perfect, but at least I haven’t done what that person has done . . .”). He sets us free from drawing such restrictive boundaries around our lives that we don’t have much room to include others. In fact, we’re really good at using the rules and the laws and such to exclude others, rather than to build and restore our relationships, both with our fellow human beings and with God. That’s what “righteousness” is really all about — not “self-righteousness” that inevitably comes along when we keep score, but the right relationships we were created to live in with other people and with God.

That’s exactly what the apostle Paul means when he writes about our “freedom in Christ”: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” We’re not set free to do anything and everything, whenever and wherever. Instead, Paul says, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:1, 13-14)

Back to the writer’s thoughts about what it means to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and to live a life of righteousness with other people and, especially, with God:

“May you be all that you really are as a follower of Jesus. Be the salt of the earth, valuable, preserving, stable, and flavorful; rightly applied without excess or deficiency. Be the light of the world, and not just the light of your own personal Journey. Shine unhidden and unhampered. Keep the law of love in Jesus Christ in such a way that knowing the word and how to rightly interpret it doesn’t get in the way of living it and teaching others to do the same.”³

So, Wallace Presbyterian Church, as we take stock of what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus Christ, let us ask ourselves:

- * Are we worth our salt as Jesus’ disciples?
- * Are we just going to sing, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,” or are we actually going to reflect the light of Christ in everything we do as a church, so others might see our good works and give glory to God?
- * Are we going to be the kind of church that only teaches and preaches and talks about how to live in a right relationship with our neighbors and with God? Or are we going to follow Jesus Christ and do what he calls us to do, all the while trusting him when he says, “**All y’all** are the salt of the earth and the light of the world”?

Let us pray: Lord God, help us to bring light into all the darkness of life, spreading hope for a better world, a world where justice is made real by your children living together in harmony. Help us to bring salt into the

blandness of life, encouraging vitality and joy in living in a world that dares to hope for the future that you promise where all your children will know themselves loved and valued and treasured, created in your image, bringing you glory forever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Jeff Harder, “How Lighthouses Work,” at www.adventure.howstuffworks.com.

²Tyler Boyer, “Flavor, Focus and Fullness,” at www.aplainaccount.org. The Thomas Merton reference is found at: Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (Bloomsbury Publishing, Jan. 8, 2003), 70.

³Ibid.