

For Private Distribution Only

As I was mulling over the text for this week, I couldn't help but think that it was strange, or at least interesting, timing to be extolling the virtues of being salt and light in the world. Just this past week we heard that new federal dietary guidelines urge Americans to drastically reduce sodium intake. Just a teaspoon a day—or less—is plenty for most people. And even less for people over 50 and those with hypertension, diabetes or chronic kidney disease. Then there's the salt at our feet. Especially with the weather of late, I'm thankful for how easy it makes roads and sidewalks to navigate. But not so happy when I get home and discover its residue on my car, my boots, the floor, sometimes even my coat... And light, well, in a season where the sun is still rising after kids have boarded the bus for school and setting before late afternoon grocery shopping has been wrapped up; when snowy days prevail and skies are gray, there just isn't a whole lot of light to be had.

But, you know, that very absence can go a long way toward highlighting presence. Lately I have been absolutely transfixed by all the diamonds I see shimmering in the snow on sunny mornings. It's like living in the sparkly winter wonderland of a glitter-strewn Christmas card. Each of those sunny days—or hours or minutes--is a gem too, a diamond in the rough of wet, gray, midwinter days. When living in Colorado, a state which prides itself on the fact that it has more sunny days per year than either Florida or California, I lost some of my appreciation for these things. It was a little too easy to take sun for granted. Constantly grasping for water bottles and tubes of sunscreen, guarding against dehydration and skin cancer, I don't remember noticing much shimmering snow there. And on the salt front, well, Colorado didn't use the stuff on its roads,

rendering them especially treacherous with all the melting and refreezing the sun's near-constant presence generated. What I wouldn't have done for a little salt on the morning when I was rear-ended on an icy state highway, totaling my car. Salt in this context is, at the very least, **useful**. Salt has been used since at least 6000 BC. It was so important that it was sometimes used as a medium of exchange. In fact, our word "salary" is derived from "salt." In Jesus' time, salt was the only seasoning used on food. It was and is a food preservative, a leavening agent for bread, and an antiseptic for wounds. But it was also used in some more diverse and perhaps surprising ways: mixed with animal dung, it helped light and sustain fires for heat, light, and cooking; rubbed on newborn babies' skin, it guarded against illness; sprinkled ritualistically on animal sacrifices and to seal contracts and covenants, it signified loyalty and wisdom. These are no **small things**, but they are also very **basic things**, just like **salt itself**.

Interesting thing about these metaphors Jesus chose to use. By themselves, they are barely noticeable, let alone purposeful, but, combined with other things, they are **forceful catalysts**, adding **zest** to our food and our lives, **growing** plants, **lighting up** otherwise dark spaces. But, as catalysts, they point **away from themselves** and toward **the things they magnify**. Alone with the sun and nothing to see, we might well lose our minds, or at least our vision. Left with only salt to eat, we would quickly die of hunger and dehydration.

Now bear in mind that in the gospel of Matthew, this Sermon on the Mount occurs not long after Jesus has called his first disciples and just after he has preached the Beatitudes, uplifting the lowly and warning about the persecution that would come to his followers. Remember that they may well have signed on with Jesus thinking that they were going to become acclaimed fulfillers of messianic prophecy and participants in a political revolution against the Roman Empire.

And now Jesus is giving them their *actual* job description. Might they be feeling a little blindsided at this point? Well, perhaps, . . . but not exactly. For one thing, what Jesus is describing here is consistent with the role they already understood themselves to play as devout Jews. For back in the book of Isaiah, God had commissioned Israel to be both “a light to the nations” and a “suffering servant.” They were well acquainted with images of light, humility, and, indeed, persecution. And neither they nor Jesus thought they were in the process of creating a new religion, just expanding and fulfilling the one they’d been born into.

The second thing is less clear in the translation of the text I asked Penny to read today. *The Message* is a paraphrase that was written in a modern narrative style to be colorful and easily heard and understood when read aloud. Like salt, this translation can help to keep things fresh and zesty, to bring out qualities of the text that might be obscured by less expansive wording. But, as a paraphrase, it isn’t an exact translation. And so, when Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, “You’re here *to be* salt” and “You’re here *to be* light,” we need to take **that** with a grain of salt. The more precise translation is the one we’re more familiar with, “You *are* the salt of the earth,” and “You *are* the light of the world.” Not just something to aspire to; it’s *already* the reality.

In their book *The Five Gospels*, the biblical scholars who comprise the Jesus Seminar ruled that the historical Jesus probably didn’t actually assign these metaphors to his followers because, as a rule, he “rejected insider/outsider discriminations of this sort: he included outsiders such as sinners and toll collectors, along with other ‘undesirables,’ among his companions.”¹ . . . Now I don’t claim to possess their academic credentials, but just suppose that the designations of salt

¹Funk, Robert W., Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p139.

and light were extended to **all faithful people**. Just suppose we all come into the world as grains of salt and rays of light, that that is our natural state of being, that to be **fully human** is to be as salt and light for and of the world. But that, as we experience pain and shame, illness, trauma, addiction or just plain old social conditioning, we back away from those roles, that we embrace them less fully, that we allow bushels and salt substitutes to obscure our true, God-given identities. In fact, most of the commentators I read this week argued that, as an inert substance, it is simply not possible for salt to lose its flavor, only to dilute it in water. A couple claimed that, because Jesus' salt would have come from boiled-down Dead Sea water, it contained impurities that *could in effect reduce* its saltiness. But, still, salt simply cannot stop being salt-- or salty-- altogether.

You may be familiar with this quote from American spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson, which Nelson Mandela borrowed for his 1994 inaugural speech. It goes like this,

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and famous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."²

I wonder if that is not in part what is happening in the Middle East today, as the people of one country after another raise their voices in nonviolent protests and risk their lives in the name of freedom from poverty and political oppression. Some Egyptian demonstrators have even named

²Williamson, Marianne. *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, pp190-191.

that they were directly inspired by the words and deeds of our own nonviolent civil rights activist, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Light shining in the darkness is indeed inspiring... and even contagious.

So what about **us**? First Congregational Church is indeed, quite literally, a faith community on a hill. We haven't lit our tower in awhile, but we have and are sharing our divine inner light and zest in our deeds: serving the Lakota people of Pine Ridge and spreading word of their great need, offering hospitality to gay and questioning high school students and their allies, raising money to build schools for impoverished youngsters in Pakistan and a restaurant to employ disabled people in Cadillac, providing boots, prescriptions and transportation to the disadvantaged of Wexford and Osceola Counties...to name just a few. If we have any doubt that God is moving in our church and our city, there is solid, undisputable proof to the contrary.

But what about the less visible ways God is acting, ways we may not fully recognize, even as God is actively harnessing our energy and flavor as light and salt, individually and in community? Perhaps acting quietly but no less valuably or meaningfully. Sometimes awareness, mindfulness, is at least half the battle. And so, I would like to close by giving you a **homework assignment**. Are you ready? Here it is: I challenge each of us to start keeping a daily **"Salt and Light" log** where we record the places in our personal lives and in this church's life where we see our own words and actions illuminating and magnifying God's presence in the world: God's love, compassion, and mercy. God's justice. God's passion for the poor, the suffering, and the forgotten. God's redemption. Shining through our unique stained glass windows, bringing out the God-flavor. If you feel comfortable doing so, send me your lists—or highlights of your lists—from time to time. If I have your permission, we'll share those lists with one another, and

the people who seek us out on our church website, through a **“Salt and Light”** blog we’ll post there.

I think we’ll be pleasantly surprised once we get started. Our output may start small, but, once our “salt and light” lenses are fully engaged, it may be hard not to see the subtle hand of God everywhere we look. So let’s get cooking and shining and logging, shall we?!

Amen.