

A Little Goes A Long Way
Cooke's-Portsmouth United Church

February 5, 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

The story is told of a pastor who was in his back yard building a wooden trellis for his wife's prize winning roses to climb as they grew. He had out the power tools, the saw, the drill and the hammer. As he was working, a neighbor boy stopped playing in his back yard, and began to intently watch the pastor as he worked. The pastor was pleased that the young boy would want to learn from his craftsmanship, and so trying to be friendly he said to the boy, "I see you watching me there. Are you interested in how to build things out of wood?" "No" the neighbor boy replied, "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer."

I like this story. It reminds us that we are often being watched to see if we live up to the expectations made of us as Christians by others. Let's consider, for a moment, the kind of behaviours that people expect of us once they know that we are church attenders, and believers. How do we model being the salt of the earth? What does it even mean to be called salt?

In the living of our faith our witness is to be distinctive-setting us apart by our love, patience and tolerance. And it is to provide zest sufficient to make a difference. Salt is a wonderful thing- it can bring out the flavour in food, but if too much salt is added, the food can be ruined. There is a delicate balance to the saltiness of our witness: too much and we turn people off; too little and we can be branded a hypocrite.

Through the years the phrase "the salt of the earth" has come to refer to those who are regarded as especially good. In its original form, it was not a reference to status but to function: you must

add zest to the life of the world. By the same token, the reference to light, and a city built upon a hill is the exhortation to be visible. The church, and we as persons affiliated with Christian community, is not supposed to simply blend in with the background.

If church community only reflects secular society it is like lighting a light and covering it up. Somehow we are to find the way to reflect light and make a difference: modelling zest and distinctiveness. It does not take much salt to add zest and distinctiveness.

Years ago I supervised an integrative seminar at the Theological College at Queen's. I met with a group of theological students weekly who presented case studies from their field placements, and we discussed skills used and insights gleaned from the experience. Supervisors of the seminar met throughout the year with the Director of Field Education for feedback and support. At one such meeting I commented on the addition of a carpet in the office of the prof, which added a hominess to the otherwise academic appearance of the office. She responded that the caretaker, Steve, had procured it for her.

She then went on to say that the Christological figure at the theological college at that time was the janitor. It was not the principal who represented the college at formal functions. Nor was it any other member of the faculty, who may have been decorated and published by other august universities and publications: it was the one who was not affiliated in any formal way at all to the college who reflected best and most the salt and distinctiveness of witness.

While he mopped floors and cleaned bathrooms he listened as professors spoke to one another and to him about wants, wishes and needs. For instance, one professor preferred wooden filing cabinets to the more sterile steel ones. He arrived to work one morning to find a wooden filing cabinet in his office, with the directive that all he needed to do was remove his files from the one

to the other and the custodian would see that the steel one was moved to the office of the professor who preferred steel. The Director of Field Education whose tutelage I was under once shared that she would like a carpet in her office to add warmth underfoot and a less Spartan feel to the desk and shelves of books. Steve went into the prop room of the Drama Department and found a carpet. He cleaned it up and left it in her office saying that she could have it on permanent loan until it was needed as a prop in a play.

There may have been the expectation that those who taught in a theological college would conduct themselves a certain way. And the reputation of the faculty of Queen's Theological College past and present is one of honour and respect. But the one who best reflected the zest of salt and the distinctiveness of Christian witness was one from whom it was least expected. The most Christ like person at Queens Theological College in the once upon a time was the one who cleaned the classrooms for the ones who taught and were taught in them. If there was a difference that he could make that would make the day to day experience of a member of the faculty more comfortable, warm or bright he simply did it.

And he did not do it to receive affirmation or accolade. In fact he was quite humble about it and his humility I think served to make the learned ones more humble. I don't know if that caretaker attended church or if he was a person of faith. But he was as Christ to those who had offices and classrooms in the university. I have not forgotten that despite the years that have elapsed since the conversation with the prof took place. The janitor was most effective at adding zest to the lives of the people that he served and he did in a way that was visible and rooted in humility. He was salt of the earth and light of the world and he modeled that it did not take much effort to make a difference. With salt and light a little goes a long way. This is what is the most profound

about the simplicity of the text: too little light is impotent and too much can be blinding; too little salt and the result is blandness; too much and the dish is ruined. A little goes along way.

I think that sometimes we can talk ourselves into inaction because we believe that to make a difference will require more human and financial resources than we have at our finger tips. But Jesus's staunchest followers and disciples did not come from the well to do and the affluent of society. While he did count some Pharisees, members of the Sanhedrin and tax collectors among his followers, most of his adherents were the poor and the marginalized. He was not simply affirming them as salt and light as one more blessing from the sermon on the mountain-although that is implied. He was challenging them- despite their circumstances- to see themselves as salt and light and to bring zest and visibility to the gospel. Given the paranoia, negativity, level of protest and bigotry that is commonplace these days, I believe that there is a great need for salt and light in the world today. Not too much to ruin and blind and not too little that makes no difference, and perhaps the best way to begin is to truly see yourself as salt and light.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. It is up to you to bring zest, preservation and light. It is not just ministers wielding tools that are under scrutiny and the watchful eye of the curious as demonstrated in the opening illustration.

Martin Niemöller was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian born in Lippstadt, Germany, in 1892. Niemöller supported Adolf Hitler's rise to power at first but when Hitler insisted on the supremacy of the state over religion, Niemöller became disillusioned. He became the leader of a group of German clergymen opposed to Hitler. In 1937 he was arrested and imprisoned. He was released in 1945 by the Allies. He continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a leading voice of penance and reconciliation for the German people after World War II. He is credited with saying the famous and pensive:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. As salt and light it is our God given responsibility to shed light in the dark places that dehumanize because of ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation.

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As such we cannot pretend that injustice and bigotry will just disappear in God's good time. It may not be your prerogative to march in the streets or participate in a prayer vigil in a city square in the wake of an atrocity. But as salt and light we at least need to pray with passion and conviction that "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

You are salt and light and must not hide your light under a bushel in fear of being found out as a person of faith. As salt and light we must strive to make heaven on earth. This is our hope. It matters not that eons have passed and we are still striving for peace, justice and harmony. Every setback-through executive action by a government or through senseless violence- is a reminder that we must not give up hoping for a better day and striving to usher it in. It comes in a small action like placing a pair of mittens on the mitten tree or an item of food in the food bank. It

comes when we weep at the senseless loss of life in random acts of violence. As the light of the world we may be little more than pinpricks of light in the vast darkness but the darkness does not completely quell the light. It only takes a spark to ignite a fire.

In these challenging times in which we live may we be instruments of peace, love, faith, hope, light and joy. Amen.