

SALT AND LIGHT

Sermon by Vicar Katherine Chatelaine-Samsen on February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5:13-20

Every year around Christmas, my mom makes a kind of Scandinavian bread called Julekake. Literally “Christmas cake”, this loaf is studded with dried fruits and citron, and flavored with cardamom and a hint of sugar. She’ll often spend an entire day making about a dozen loafs to eat, give away to friends and family, and freeze for the months ahead. One year, when I was in college, I came home the day after finals and was ready to reward myself with a slice of Julekake, which my mom had promised to bake that day. As I walked through the front door, I was greeted with the scent of freshly baked bread with a hint of cardamom. I walked into the kitchen and saw my mom staring at the freshly baked bread with a forlorn look on her face. I followed her gaze down to the fruit-studded loaves and noticed that they were a little misshapen and pale, like they couldn’t quite get up the energy to rise to the golden peaks that the loaves usually formed. She quickly picked up a still-hot loaf and placed it on a cutting board and quickly sawed off the end of the bread, giving it a taste. Her eyes fell as she chewed the bread. “What’s wrong?” I asked, a little confused by her reaction to this normally delicious Christmas treat. She looked up and responded sadly, “I forgot the salt.”

You see, salt plays an essential role in any yeast bread. It gives the bread flavor – too little, and the bread has a flat taste, while too much makes it unpalatable. It helps color the crust by interacting with the natural sugars in flour and preserving them to lead to that nice, caramelly brown color. It also gives structure to the bread by controlling the rise of the yeast and helping the gluten structure form. Even though a tiny bit of salt goes into yeast bread, it plays a huge role.

We hear a lot about salt in today’s Gospel. A lot about light, too. We continue to work our way through a four-week series on the Sermon on the Mount, which is Jesus’ first big, public teaching. This series of teachings covers three full chapters in the Gospel of Matthew and is a primer on what it means to be one of Jesus’ disciples. We heard the Beatitudes last week, which is a series of blessings and markers of discipleship. This week’s passage has some really great imagery – salt and light. Let’s look at each one in turn.

Jesus says you are the salt of the earth. Salt symbolized wisdom and purity. It was a precious commodity for many cultures. Wars have been fought over salt! And why? Well, first it preserves things. That’s why it’s possible to eat peas in the middle of February. Salt makes things taste good, which is probably why companies like Frito-Lay and McDonalds have such a huge market share. Salt affects the way our bodies function – too much and you have high blood pressure, and too little and you run the risk of dehydration and cramping, which is something that athletes have to be aware of. Before every snowstorm, the city goes around and dumps salt on the road, which helps melt snow and ice. Salt is also an essential

ingredient in bread, as I mentioned earlier. Salt is so ubiquitous, so essential to our daily lives, that it's almost hard to describe - salt is salty.

Now let's look at light. You are the light of the world, Jesus says. Light illuminates things. The first thing we often do when walking into a dark room is look for the light switch so that we can see what's around us. Light also exposes things – we put a spotlight on something we want everyone to see, like many of the buildings downtown, or when catching someone in a dubious act. Too much light can be blinding. Like salt, there's nothing that can take light's place, and no way of understanding it except to perceive the thing itself. Light is light.

Salt and light have something in common – they are both defined by their function, or purpose. If salt isn't salty, it's not salt. If light isn't light, then it's nothing. Jesus' statements about salt being cast out and light not doing its job are rhetorical – they're meant to make a statement, to emphasize a point. Salt that has lost its flavor isn't salt anymore, and light that is stuffed away under a bushel basket isn't light anymore – it's just a useless granular object or a fire hazard.

Just as striking is that Jesus says you *are* the salt of the earth, you *are* the light of the world. Note the tense – this is a present-tense thing. Jesus' disciples *are* salt, they *are* light. It's not something they were or will become – it's who they are. It's essential to their very natures. And it's when they act as their true selves, as salty, light-filled people, **people who flavor and illuminate the world with their faith** - that's when the world can see what following Jesus is all about.

We're disciples of Jesus Christ, so we – all of us here today – we all are salt and light. Look around you in the pews – look at all of the salt in this sanctuary! Look at all of the light radiating around this room! Look at it all! It's remarkable!

And yet, what use is our saltiness if we only are salty in this space? Keeping the saltiness in this room is like that big pile of road salt that's just north of the 1-95 tunnel in Baltimore. It just sits there, looking like a sad sledding hill, until the snow team is deployed to spread the salt on the road to melt the snow and ice and provide traction for vehicles as they go about their business. That pile of salt is not of much use while it sits around in one place. **It's when it's spread out that it can fulfill its true purpose.**

Or what if we covered up all the windows in this room, closed all the doors, and just stayed here together? I suppose the walls of this church could be a bushel basket. All of the light that is here in this room would soon become a nuisance – we couldn't sleep because it's too bright. There's so much light in here that we'd soon go blind. **It's only when the light is let out into the darkness that it can fulfill its true purpose.**

We are the salt *of the earth*. We are the light *of the world*. We don't exist to be salt for ourselves or light for ourselves. Our saltiness and light must be shared to be worth anything. As Jesus' disciples, our purpose, our reason for being disciples, is to be salt and light for the world.

Let's revisit that salt heap and that light shut up inside a building. Admittedly, it can be tempting to remain in those places. The salt in the heap knows that it's with other salt, other grains that are just like it. It doesn't know where it's going to be spread or if it will end up being useful. Or maybe it thinks it might not be proper to use salt in a given location. Remaining in the pile is the more comfortable option. Same with the light. Maybe the darkness outside seems so dark that it will defy the laws of physics and will swallow up any light that attempts to shine into it. Or maybe we don't feel like light ourselves, that we have too much brokenness or darkness inside.

But a church that contains its salt is as useless as a pile of road salt that never gets used, and a church that keeps its light hidden had might as well be dark. Our call is to share this salt and light – our ways of following Jesus - with the world! We don't have to shrink back from seasoning conversation or hide the light of Christ that shines within us. We are called and commissioned to tell the world who we are by putting our faith into action to very publicly love and serve our neighbors in Christ's name. And Christ is the one who fulfilled all righteousness in perfect love, who taught us that those who the world calls least are blessed in the Kingdom of God; that when we visit someone in prison, feed the hungry, or welcome the stranger, we are serving him; and Christ is the one whose great love led him to the cross and out of the tomb to proclaim the victory of the Kingdom of God. That is salt and light.

I've seen a lot of salt and light recently. Looking at pictures of people who showed up at airports around the country to support refugees and immigrants, I was struck by the number of signs emblazoned with passages from scripture. Popular ones were Matthew 25:35 "for I was a stranger and you welcomed me" and Leviticus 19:34 "the stranger who lives among you shall be regarded as a native-born, and you shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." There were also signs reminding people that Jesus was a refugee – much like what is outside this church right now. By showing up at airports and in many other places around our country and the world, these Christians were shining a light on what was happening and their signs seasoned the conversation surrounding these refugees. There's so much more that needs to be done, but this is a start – showing up and saying "this is what my faith is all about – I welcome refugees and immigrants" is being the salt and the light of the world.

And Christ Lutheran Church is a salty, light-filled congregation. I think of this past Wednesday, when members of this congregation came together with folks from the neighborhood to talk about the events of the past two weeks in an open, supportive, and safe space. Salt seasoned the conversation and connections that were made. Light illuminated ways to heal divides and to model a way forward. Our saltiness and light were shared with our neighbors and with one another. I'm confident that they will be shared far beyond that one evening as we continue to build relationships with our neighbors and shine beyond these walls.

We're salty, light-filled people whose presence brings salt and light to the world. And we are not doing this on our own, or just to make our own saltiness or our own light known.

We've been given our salty and light-filled natures to proclaim the Kingdom of God. We are told that the Kingdom of God – God's active presence in the world - is like a grain of yeast. This little piece of yeast works its way through bread dough to make it rise. Salt works in partnership with the yeast by helping the bread dough hold onto the air that the yeast produces as it ferments, providing evidence of the work that the yeast. Light provides heat to bake the dough into bread, which nourishes the body. We are that salt that works in partnership with God to make God's active presence known in the world. We are that light that works with God to nourish the spirit of the world. Let us confidently be the salt and the light that work with God to make the Kingdom of God manifest in our midst.

Thanks be to God,

AMEN.