

Last week we heard the beginning of what the church calls Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in the gospel of Matthew. These blessings, or Beatitudes are words of praise and promise for who we are and how we live as people created in God's image, with compassion and humility, defending those who are mistreated, willing to stand up for what is right and just, seeking to spread God's love and righteousness throughout the world.

We are blessed—and whenever you do something kind for another person or speak up on behalf of someone who's been hurt, you know how right that feels. But it's not easy to live according to the Beatitudes, God's blessings, every day! And the Scriptures we hear this morning remind us again of how hard it can be to focus our lives on serving others and making our world a place of peace and justice, in the midst of fear, change and conflict.

The challenges that faced people of faith, in both the times of Jesus and the prophet Isaiah, are not so different from the choices we struggle with today as the church and as Christians. Religious leaders and people of faith were struggling with how to respond to the turmoil and changes going on around them, including the influence of other religious beliefs and the fear of losing the core beliefs and practices of the Jewish faith.

When there is turmoil among us or around us, it is tempting to hunker down and circle the wagons, as it were, focusing on ourselves, separating ourselves from those who are different, so as to feel safe and sometimes feeling superior in our beliefs, clinging to religious practices for our own sakes rather than to serve God and others. As in the example that the prophet Isaiah gives of religious fasting.

Isaiah proclaims eloquently: In your confusion and fear, don't turn to worshipping God by focusing only on passive practices that become self-serving and empty of true meaning. No, God passionately asks of us: *Is not this the fast that I choose—to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless into your house, to cover the naked, to satisfy the needs of the afflicted?*

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. Wow, what a call for these times of ours!

In Jesus' time, under Roman occupation, the religious leaders narrowed their focus to enforcing religious laws and so they too began to lose touch with God's vision of justice and compassion for all peoples, especially those in need who were being rejected.

Jesus' challenge to those who would listen, then and now, is to live out God's awesome vision according to the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, the merciful, those who hunger for righteousness, the peacemakers.* And then his startling call: *You are the salt of the earth; you are*

the light of the world. Are you really talking to us today, as the church and Christians struggling to serve others in the midst of conflict and changes, fear and anger in our nation?

As you know, salt by itself isn't worth much; it doesn't taste good by itself. But added to other things, it does great things. Salt has so many different uses and purposes! Its tangy taste is meant to be sprinkled on top or mixed in with other foods so as to bring out their flavor—the unique taste of vegetable soup or French fries, eggs or Doritos.

Just like us, right? Well, like salt, we bring out the flavor of genuine community when we love our neighbor. We mix kindness, compassion and forgiveness into all our relationships. And I believe that includes how we treat refugees who are seeking asylum in our nation. That includes welcoming Muslim professors, doctors and students who want to come to our universities and medical institutions. Salt by itself loses its flavor and is no longer good for anything.

We sprinkle others with goodwill and peace, hope and joy. We mix healing, goodness and faith into our relationships. And so we bring out the treasures and gifts in other people, who pass on their saltiness. That may include going out of our way to prepare food and then sit at table with those who come to Bread & Roses. Not only taking loads of canned food to First Fruits Pantry, but also visiting there on a day when clients come to pick up food, talking with them as well as the people who run the pantry. Is there another need in our community to which we would like to respond with saltiness and passion?

Salt has so many good uses and purposes! It is used as a preservative to keep food from spoiling. We mix our knowledge and with the soil, air and water in order to restore and preserve the health of our planet. As a church, we preserve faith in Christ and the following of his teachings, including the Beatitudes. We preserve compassion and justice and honesty. We try to stop the things that are hurting or destroying what is good and right and just.

This past Friday, two of you attended a Muslim service in Concord to which non-Muslims were especially invited, with conversation to follow in local coffee shops. Another member is offering to lead a discussion this month on a book entitled *Gather at the Table*, which challenges us to examine racism in our nation and in our hearts. Salt is used to disinfect wounds. Salt is used for healing.

Salt can also make us thirsty. We are thirsty and we cause people to be thirsty for truth and justice, for reconciliation and living together in peace. We share hopes and visions of community; we invite others to discuss controversial issues, no matter how uncomfortable it may be when we strongly disagree.

And yes, salt is also put on our icy, snowy roads to help keep us safe while driving. As the salt of the earth, we help to thaw the icy hearts of those who lack compassion, who may wish to retaliate against others because of their own suffering or fears or the hatred in which they have been raised.

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Like salt, light is meant to be spread and

shared as well. It doesn't do much good hidden under a bushel or shades pulled down to protect us. God is reaching out to others through you in all kinds of amazing and subtle ways.

In your bulletin, there is an insert entitled: *Salt and Light Log*. I would like to invite you in the next week or two to list some of the good things you are doing outside of the church, examples of when and where God is working through you to help others or make life better here or anywhere in the world.

Please include the smallest of gestures or words of encouragement, regular commitments, one-time conversations, and unexpected opportunities. Now this may sound like I'm asking you to focus on yourself, but no, this isn't about bragging or closing the circle, quite the opposite. For one thing, I will keep your name confidential. My hope is that we can learn about and lift up the ways in which God is working through our congregation to reach out to others, using our gifts and following our passions. And I hope to discover the connections you've made and are making with different people and groups in our communities, connections that we may choose to build upon.

I'm sure that I will hear about things that seem like nothing to you but that no one has done the way you did it. I am sure that I will learn a lot of things that will open up ideas and connections for our church to explore.

And yes, I also hope that you will recognize how God is always working through you as salt and light. Even when you think that you're really not doing much of anything special, YOU ARE--- and you can give thanks to God every time you write something on your Salt and Light Log.

Please give me or email me your lists, once or several times, with a deadline of Sun. Feb. 26. Keep the lists coming; don't worry how many or how often, I will rejoice if I have Salt and Light Logs coming out of my ears! You can always start by telling me about something good that another church member or friend did.

I'm excited about how God will guide us in our mission to make human lives and all creation tastier and brighter!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

SOURCES

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville KY, 2010).

www.homileticsonline.org. Commentaries and sermons on both Scripture passages, including information about different uses for salt!

www.workingpreacher.org. Commentaries on both Scripture passages.
Thanks to Rev. David Lose for his idea of a "Salt and Light Log."