



**“A Season of Seasoning”**

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Matthew 5:13-16***

“You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world.” Jesus didn’t simply drop those words on his followers from a deep silent void. They came after a substantial fanfare: the eloquent if alarming discourse that we refer to as the Beatitudes.

It was the springtime of Jesus’ life and work on earth. The first blooming. The clear new growth. Jesus, with his freshly-called band of followers had been traveling around Galilee, teaching in the synagogue, preaching that the reign of God was near, healing diseases and afflictions. Crowds began to congregate. And then Jesus goes up on the mountain—always a tip-off to the savvy reader of scripture that something of major significance is about to occur. His disciples follow. And then Jesus sits down and speaks to them,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the realm of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

On and on Jesus goes, describing various configurations of humanity as Bless-ed. Blessed. The Greek word means the highest state of happiness. It is used to stand for the Hebrew word *‘ashre*, which is an exclamation, “How happy!”

How happy are those who mourn..... How happy are those who are merciful.

This phrasing would most certainly have grabbed the attention of Jesus’ audience. It sounded totally unbelievable, preposterous—yet there was the ring of authority in it; the tone of truth.

And then Jesus focuses specifically on those closest to him: How happy are *you* when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great with God.

**Then** he continues with the words Eleanor read to us, “You are the salt of the earth.”

“You are the salt of the earth.”

Salt is a seasoning, a supplier of zest, an enhancing of the flavors that are already present. Salt is an effective preservative, and one that was absolutely essential in Jesus’ time. Salt is conspicuous by its absence—you can tell when there’s not enough in a dish.

You are the salt of the earth. You keep the earth from spoiling—but you are not simply a preservative, a spiritual sprinkling of BHA or BHT or calcium propionate. You are to give zest to the living that goes on. To make life savory. To make the tasteless palatable.

And salt goes beyond that. To speak of salt is to touch upon the alignment of salinity with consanguinity. “Salinity” can refer to the taste experience, and also to the relative proportion of salt in a solution, which reminds us of our consanguinity, our relationship by blood not only to those who carry our DNA, but to all humanity—with whom we share the salt-water solution in our blood that so wondrously reflects the ocean’s salinity. We walk around with this incorporation of our connectedness to one another and to the waters of the birth of this planet in our veins and arteries, pulsing through our hearts. No wonder that salt was, for the Hebrew people, a sign of the covenant. We read in Leviticus, “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.” [Leviticus 2:13]

In a desert land, people are acutely aware of the life-sustaining necessity of salt. To keep hydrated. The God who keeps covenant promises to keep the people alive—no small thing, considering the history of Israel—and the people acknowledge—and celebrate—their reliance upon the Most High by lifting up—giving back to the Author of Life—that upon which their life depends: food, water, salt—saying, implicitly, “We know the value of these gifts. They are our most precious commodities. And they come from You, O Holy One.”

So, how appropriate *is* it that we consider this passage of scripture as we come together today to re-dedicate a house of worship and a campus of service renovated by the legacy of the harvest of sea salt? In 1871 the Oliver family purchased a salt pond in Mt. Eden. Over a century later, when Alden Oliver and his nephew Gordon, departed this life, proceeds from the Oliver family's salt-producing business were bequeathed to Eden United Church of Christ to be used for the church's ministry and for the benefit of the community. Here is salt. Savor. Zest. Preservation. Community connection. Enduring covenant.

Eden's pastor, Arlene Nehring, expanded upon the salt theme in a recent email message:

"In the metaphorical sense, the salty faith of Alden Oliver, and Eden's members and friends, has enabled us to develop and implement the master plan, establish the Eden Area Foundation, and offer spiritual nurture within and beyond our walls, and to invite and welcome scores of new members—all while the campus has been under renovation, the Foundation has been under development, and its gifts have been put to work in the wider community."

Don't lose your saltiness, Jesus cautions the disciples. Somewhat weirdly. Pure sodium chloride doesn't deteriorate, doesn't lose its saltiness. Jesus may be warning against adulteration, not deterioration. There is a story told about a merchant in Sidon who bought great quantities of precious salt from the marshes of Cyprus and hid them in houses to avoid paying tax on the salt. But the floors of the houses were earthen and absorbed the salt, rendering it unfit for seasoning or preserving. That might be a way to lose our salt-ness. To sit off by ourselves, kind of oozing into the ground, being sucked into the path of non-involvement—non-caring, non-connected, non-covenantal. To do that instead of doing the work of salt: mixing it up out there in the world, working inconspicuously, yet tellingly, having an effect out of all proportion to our number.

Not content with one metaphor, Jesus lavishes another on his followers. "You are the light of the world." And then goes on to state the fairly obvious: No one after lighting an oil lamp puts it under a bushel basket. "Well, duh," the disciples probably said, or at least thought. "Of course no one puts a burning lamp under a basket. It'll either be snuffed out or start a fire."

Understandably, then, Jesus goes on to say, put your light on the lampstand, and pushes the analogy to conclude with, “let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.”

Randi Walker sees in this injunction a call to courage. “It takes courage,” she says, “to perch up there on the lampstand; it takes courage to be conspicuously enlightening.” Courage, and mutual encouragement. Which we seek and find here today. In this renovated sanctuary—this place set apart to re-connect with the Eternal One—the space that grounds, but does not ensnare, all who worship here—providing the lampstand from which the light of mission can shine.

You people of Eden have been entrusted with riches from salt and given the opportunity to shine. The hours, the toil, the prayers, the planning, the legacy that you have invested reveal your saltiness, and your light shines. How happy are you who have built the labyrinth. How happy are you who have extended hospitality to other communities of faith. How happy are you who have served on the New Millennium Committee. How happy are you who have housed FESCO, and Child Abuse Prevention, and the office of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. How happy are you who have borne one another’s burdens, and rejoiced in each gladstone milestone of each other’s lives. How happy are you who have provided church school and church camp for children and young people of this congregation and beyond this congregation. How happy are you who have preached and taught and learned and heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you haven’t always recognized that you are happy in these things? But you do know that you are blessed. That your light is shining.

Psalm 112 is kind of a precursor to the Beatitudes that got this whole salt and light thing rolling. Let me conclude with some verses from that psalm as an encouragement to all who seek to live as salt and light.

Hallelujah!

Happy are those who entrust their lives to the Holy One,

Who greatly delight in God’s teachings...

Wealth and riches are in their houses,

And their bountiful spirit endures forever.

Even in the starless night they shine, a light for those who seek God's way.

They are compassionate and merciful, quick to aid others.

It is well with those who act generously and lend easily,

Who conduct their affairs with justice.

For those who are secure in the ways of the Blessed One will never be shaken;

They will be remembered forever. ....

They have distributed their goods freely, they have given to the poor;

Their gracious provision for others goes on and on;

Their dignity and honor increase. ....

Yes, even in the starless night you shine, a light for those who seek God's way. Amen.