

I'm grateful to Cyndy Haug and our board of deacons for preparing the inserts you see in the bulletins during these Sundays leading up to Covenant Sunday. (The ways we choose to offer our gifts in service to Christ are of course not limited to the fields identified on our covenant form, nor to the broad themes and Christian disciplines to which the bulletin inserts call our attention.) Still, I find these inserts to be helpful reminders of some of the ways in which we pray about offering our lives to God for the year to come.

The theme for this week is Evangelism—sharing the good news. One starving person telling another where the Bread is to be found. [N.T. Niles ?] Many of us would agree with the most refreshing article Ben Langhorst recently submitted for our *Sea Star* regarding evangelism at its worst, and I'm guessing a lousy sermon on evangelism is about as distressing to liberal Christians as any sermon could possibly be. Evangelism touches upon some of the most sacred cows of our current intellectual culture: religion is a private affair; no one has the right to tell someone else how they should live their life; certainly anyone who actually believes his or her religion is somehow superior to others or somehow True (with a capital "T") is a grave threat to the republic.

To avoid preaching that lousy sermon, I guess I'll stick close to what we hear Jesus preaching here at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The only things we've missed before our lesson this morning are the 8 (or 9) opening beatitudes: the "blessed are those who..."; the "greatly to be envied are you when...you are poor in spirit, when you mourn, when you submit your strength to the will of God..." Jesus is simply stating the facts as He understands them. We get to hear His guiding principles, His vision, His mindset, His priorities, His keys for a life of blessing and fullness.

So He continues: "You all, My followers, are the salt of the earth...; You all are the light of the world." Interesting: He's simply stating the fact of the matter. (Later, at the end of the gospel, He will issue the command: "Go ye, therefore, into all the nations of the world and make disciples—baptizing, teaching people all that I have been telling you.") [Mt 28:19]

Here we come to an important distinction between Greek ethics and the ethics of Jesus. Greek teaching is likely to say "Become what you *should* be;" Jesus and His followers begin from "Become who you *are*." Not, "Get out there and knock on doors and act enthusiastic about it, you slackers," but "If you are taking Me seriously, if you have entered into meaningful relationship with Me, you already *are* the salt of the earth, the light of the world." This is simply the truth of the matter. (We are all in the process of discovering that if we keep tending to our side of the equation, then God is very capable of deploying us and guiding us from His side of the equation.)

If Jesus is calling us the "salt of the earth," I want to know what it means! You, too?

What good is salt? What is salt for? For that matter, what good is a follower of Jesus? How about Christ's Church: what are we for? (Early on the Greeks had also come to think of "virtue" as the relationship between an object or person's function and its performance. What is a chariot, or an automobile, for? A refrigerator? A refrigerator which won't keep things cold is no good. It only takes up space, and if it's not fulfilling its purpose it's fit only for the garbage dump.)

Any good New Englander knows a mountain of salt piled up in one of the Dept. of Transportation storage depot in January is doing no good if the roads are iced over and you can't drive because there's no salt on the pavement where it can do some good. A storage pile is necessary, but that's not where salt serves its purpose. The ancients knew salt did no good if it was not in contact with the meat or fish it would preserve. (No refrigeration back then, of course, and they needed to keep their animal protein sources from going bad—the way people still make beef jerky today.) We moderns understand salt does no good sitting jumbled together in a storage heap or in a saltshaker, except maybe to give us a secure feeling that we don't have to go to the store yet to buy more.

Salt serves its function as it comes into contact with what it needs to preserve or transform. Salt even a centimeter away from the salmon it will turn into jerky (I saw the sign for a store selling fish jerky on the Olympic peninsula last week) or from the bland potatoes on your plate that need a little zest, does no good at all.

Salt may not sound very dramatic to us, and we can live quite well without jerky products, but let's not miss that Jesus is assigning a very high purpose to us, His Church. For one thing, imagine His audacity. It would have been embarrassing enough if He had dared to say, "You, My followers, are the salt of Galilee." Or, "You, My Church, are a light to Jerusalem," or even to all the Jews. Who was He, what was He thinking, to casually inform His ragtag disciple band that by the way, their destiny was to influence, to preserve, to transform the entire world? It sounds a lot less odd to us today, half a world away from that mountain in Galilee—can we even begin to imagine how crazy it must have sounded to them? Was this Jesus a megalomaniac, or was He just plain insane? (It's precisely this sort of insanity which caused the earliest church to conclude the only sanity to be found in Jesus was to believe that He was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, come to earth from a higher dimension.)

For another thing, this Jesus [at least in Matthew] did not apparently have a very high view of human nature, or a very rosy assessment of the possibilities for human advancement thru the normal channels here on planet earth. The function of salt was to prevent something already dead from "going bad." Was He saying that the normal human hopes for progress, education, political advancement, international understanding were ultimately a dead end? The political and military promise of the *Pax Romana*, the ethical and religious prominence the Jews had already attained, all the wisdom and the academies of higher learning the Greeks had already established—in the end, Jesus thought the hope of the world was not in contained any of these vehicles, then or now, but instead unleashed in His ragtag followers, His Church? Could it be?... "You are the salt of the earth..."

Don't worry: I won't repeat the litany of local and global misery and peril I began with two Sundays ago. Once was enough. But it's all enough to give one pause. How are the usual best hopes of the world managing in the timeless battles against poverty, and pollution, and corruption, and violence, and war, and irresponsible corporate behavior, and personal sin? What would a stranger conclude about the state of our morality—perhaps, say, a pious Muslim imam from Islamabad or Mecca—if he were plopped down in a typical American home for just one night with a clicker able to access the full range of cable TV options and a computer and monitor able to access the full range of internet websites? (As in every time and place, the Holy Spirit will redeem the darkness and the Church keeps persevering—but maybe this imaginary exercise helps us

to understand something of Jesus' outlook.) He was no optimist about the powers of this world being able to rescue the people and the institutions of this world. According to Matthew, surely, He saw the world as somehow already dead and needing to be preserved, transformed into something far better. The world cannot transform itself.

Salt is effective in its purpose if both of two things happen: 1) Salt is effective if it doesn't stay huddled together in the saltshaker and doesn't merely come close to the meat it cures but comes into contact with it. 2) Salt is effective if it doesn't lose its saltiness, its essence. (Salt doesn't literally have this option, but we humans sure do—hence Jesus warns us and encourages us.) Not to *become* salt: but to *remain* salt. You and I are already in relationship with Him thru His Spirit; we are “salt.” Our choice and our challenge is always to be influencing the culture we contact rather than have it influence us. When we become indistinct from the world around us, we've lost our saltiness and our usefulness to Jesus. (Apart from the Holy Spirit of God with us, it would be impossible for us to remain distinct and there would never ever be a second generation church. The culture is always wearing us down, always buying us out, always seducing us. We wouldn't have a chance, but for the power of God with us. But by God, the Church is still here two millennia later.) “Surely you're not into Church?” “I thought you went to college.” “Are you still being taken in by those ancient superstitions my generation and I outgrew as teenagers?” “You're one of them? Do you need a crutch that badly?”...

Two things tend to happen when two contrary influences come into contact with each other. When I was a boy refrigerators and freezers still had to be manually defrosted (Do some of you remember those days?)—I remember my mom would periodically have to open the door of the fridge, and the little freezer compartment, and put in pans of hot water to melt all the accumulated ice. The ice would eventually melt—but at the same time the hot water would be cooled down to luke warm.

There's always the danger that the salt will lose its saltiness as a result of being in contact with the culture. If that ever happens the “unsalt” has forfeited its purpose, and so is thrown away, fit for nothing better than to take up space in the cracks between the cobblestones. (This is not telling of our eternal destiny, only of the sadness of any person or church who forfeits the joy and the growth and the reward of being deployed by our Lord according to His Mission, His purpose.)

John Chrysostom was the most influential and enduring preacher of the fifth century, essentially the bishop of Byzantium, the center of the Church at the time. Of this passage he observed, “When our non-Christian neighbors see us building ourselves fine houses, and laying out spacious gardens and baths, and buying fields, they are not willing to believe that we are preparing for another residence away from our city...Do you not hear Christ say He is trusting us to be salt and light in this world, in order that we may both help keep solid those who are melting in luxury, and shine light to those brought into darkness by the cares of wealth?” (cited in F. D. Bruner, *Matthew*, Word, p 163. Several of these insights come from his work.)

Chrysostom was addressing the same issue as Laura so capably addressed in her sermon last Sunday: if we are the “salt of the earth” we are aliens to the conventions and wisdom of this world; we are “resident aliens” here on earth—and instead, true citizens of heaven. We are living not as regular people who “go to church” on Sunday but as

Christ's Church who goes out to work, to school, to the ends of the earth, to influence our friends for His sake, because He has sent us, during the week?

How in the world will our culture be influenced by us if the way we live and speak and prioritize and invest and watch TV and raise our children and face the prospect of death or loss is no different from theirs? If ever the Church loses our distinctiveness, we are fit to be tossed aside. Nothing personal; Jesus still loves us and everything—it's just the fact that His people are salt, and He has a purpose for His Church, His salt. He needs us to influence them toward the Way of His love, not have them influence us into mindlessness and aimlessness.

I'm delighted so many of you were able to be here last night to enjoy the dinner and celebration the Marshallese congregation prepared for us to enjoy. (Thank you Joe, and Trish, for all your work.) We see this exact same challenge confronting this alien Marshallese community. Will the babies and little ones we saw last night all grow up speaking Marshallese, dancing the native dances, knowing the history and the myths and the lore of their islands, their people? Will they be able to make the intricate handcrafted jewelry the grandmothers can still craft so delicately? Will the youngsters in our Orange County public schools grow up to share the passion of their parents for a homeland they have never seen? It's an uphill road, isn't it, to live as resident aliens, to live as the "salt of the earth." To give better than we get in this world.

This is the call of Christ to this and every church: to give better than we get. To be not who we should be but who we are. This is one reason you, this church, is so valuable. Many of you abide in Christ and stay close to Him, on purpose. Many of you pray every day; you study some portion of the Scriptures each day; you participate in worship every Sunday you are within 30 miles; you support the church with your time and your talents and your gifts and your finances. You gather together regularly in small groups with the risen Christ present at the center of each one. Many of you will be supporting the upcoming All-Church Retreat or Prayer 101 weekends.

In general, you pursue your faith with integrity, admitting honest doubt and claiming honest faith. You do not pretend to be who you are not. You welcome guests and those curious about the Lord Jesus, wherever they may be on their spiritual journey, as welcome sister and brother rather than as inferior sinner who doesn't yet quite fully belong. You are willing to entertain paradox and live with the complexity inherent in the Bible and in the authentic life of faith, rather than to insist reality is more simple or less challenging than it is. You do not abdicate to others the responsibilities you are called to accept, the commitments you are called to keep. To a great degree you are striving to submit to the guidance and the authority of the Holy Spirit of Jesus over your life. From what I observe, you are often willing to share with others what Christ and His Church have meant to you and why you are willing to live out of step with your sophisticated friends, at least in this matter of your ultimate purpose in life.

Salt has always worked in these patient, undramatic ways. It takes time for salt to have its preserving effect. You know I sometimes lament the direction of the popular culture and wish there were more movies or TV shows which did not so often portray the people of Jesus as buffoons (if at all), did not portray reality as if of course there is no God who loves and cares about all people, of course there is no Source or Ground for any tenable hope or even much meaning in life for thinking people, once you strip away the amusement and entertainment and glitz factors—therefore "eat drink and be merry for

tomorrow we die.” Sure, it might be nice if politicians or Hollywood producers could powerfully influence the culture, bridge the divide and bring people into the Kingdom on a grand scale—but still, Jesus is calling you and me to be the “salt of the earth.”

Let’s imagine there were powerful movies, or effective ad campaigns, or another national catastrophe, which brought the curious into our churches. What a shame if they were to find nothing more substantial than a churchfull of people relying on effective ad campaigns to influence the culture, if they were to encounter a churchfull of believers essentially no different from the culture also enamored of self-reliance and accomplishment and glitz and quick fixes.

“But you, My followers, My disciples...you are the salt of the earth.” Salt has always worked in quiet, undramatic ways. Back in the first half of the second century A.D. the brilliant student of philosophy Justin Martyr observed, as He converted to Jesus and committed to His Church, “The holiness which shined in Christians’ lives and the patience which triumphed over their enemies’ cruelty at their deaths made [me] conclude the doctrine of the Gospel was Truth.” [cited in *Puritan Daily Devotional Chronicles*, Hearthstone, Jan 28 entry] One conversation at a time, one visit with a new neighbor or bereaved friend at a time, one invitation to the Christmas cantata or one gift of the upcoming Christmas CD our choir is now recording at a time, one seed planted at a time.

When you think about it, almost everything you do may be “salt” to someone, whether you notice them noticing or not. The ways you take seriously and cultivate your marriages; the ways you make sure you commit to Christ’s Church in costly ways in order that your children will grow up to be involved in the Church (as best you can influence them to do so); the ways you dress differently from those around you, who use their dress to advertise and advance and attain their personal agendas; the ways you order your lives to respect the environment over which we humans have domain; the ways you know when to speak about Jesus and when to ask your friend about her faith and listen; the ways you conduct your business as if the Spirit were present in every conversation, every transaction; the ways you look for where God is trying to break thru in your own life just now and in the lives of those around you; the ways you order your leisure time and travel and plan for your future. The times you forgive and the times you stand firm, refusing to be walked all over. As Justin Martyr observed, the way you carry on, trusting deeply, in the eternal love of God in Christ, and in the life to come, when confronting your own death or the death of a loved one. The ways in which we may be the salt of the earth are about endless.

“You are the salt of the earth.” Not when you get it together, start knocking on doors to make converts, get caught up on your pledges for 2005, improve your short term memory, take the next step toward your God-ordained future, your “vocatio;” not when you get perfectly clear about whether or how Jesus is the Son of God. “You are the salt of the earth.”

Your neighbors may or may not notice, may or may not respond.

But I promise, your Lord will notice.

This is what you are for, I am for, His Church is for. To please Him. To give glory to God. Is there anything else?

**Matthew 5:13-16**

13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.