

“If Salt Has Lost Its Flavor”  
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5: 13-16  
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Salt of the earth.

I wonder what you think of when you hear that phrase. Maybe you think of someone you have described that way, someone who is a really good, decent hardworking human being. Or maybe you think of one of at least 3 films, 3 songs, or 3 albums with that title. But what I always think of is a song from *Godspell*, “You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth, you are the city on a hill”, words straight out of Matthew. And so since I was humming that song all week, I decided to listen to it again on YouTube. I noticed that it includes these lyrics, “You gotta live right to be the light” “You gotta be pretty to be the city of God” and “You cannot have fault and be the salt of the earth.” And when I looked at the verses in Matthew there’s nothing about being pretty or living right or having no faults. Jesus just says flat out: “You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.” We might wonder just who he’s talking to.

These two paragraphs are part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He has just walked his listeners through the eight Beatitudes, which start with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and then goes on to talk in similar terms about blessed are those who mourn, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. Then, as he moves toward the end of the list, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake,” and then he makes a big pivot and the final beatitude is directed to the people sitting in front of him, and he says, “Blessed are YOU when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my behalf.” I can imagine the disciples looking at each other and saying, “Great. Who needs that kind of blessing? Maybe we should rethink this discipleship deal.”

It’s at that point that Jesus tells them, “You are the salt of the earth.” And he does have a little sumpin-sumpin to say about that. “But if salt has lost its flavor it ain’t got much in its favor.” And then, “You are the light of the world...but if a light is under a bushel, it’s kinda lost something crucial.” (Lyrics from *Godspell*)

In other words, he’s not saying “You must *become* the salt...or the light,” but that they already are. They need to be careful not to lose their salty flavor, and to resist hiding their light under a bushel basket. They’re already like a city on a hill that cannot hide itself away; whatever happens there is on full view to the world.

Ironically, I guess, one of our Puritan forebears, John Winthrop, was the first to take that metaphor, city on a hill, and apply it to this country. As the immigrants from England were still on the ship *Arbella* in the Boston harbor in 1630, Winthrop preached a sermon in which he exhorted these religious refugees to set an example in their new homeland of Christian charity, mutual affection, and unity for the whole world to see. “Winthrop’s sermon,” according to Wikipedia, “gave rise to the widespread belief that America is “God’s country” because, metaphorically, it is a “Shining City upon a Hill,” an early example of American Exceptionalism.” This phrase, “city on a hill,” has been used in speeches by Presidents John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, just to name a few. If I ever have the chance to speak

with John Winthrop in the afterlife, I would love to ask him what he thinks about his words being used to promote American civil religion/exceptionalism. But no matter his opinion, this is the kind of thinking, or coopting of religious ideas, that has led some people—many people—to believe that the United States is called to be a shining example of a Christian nation. Somehow this idea has overridden the more inclusive philosophy of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights that make it clear that no religion can have preferential treatment in the governance of our nation, that we are a nation of, for, and by all people, all religions, and ethnicities.

This notion of a civil religion, that America is a Christian nation, has not only had negative implications for those who are not Christian in our country, but it's been problematic for Christians as well. Faith and patriotism are integrally intertwined; they have become practically synonymous in some circles. Being a good Christian equates with being a good American and vice versa. Democracy is seen as a Christian value, when in fact, if you read the Bible you'll find nothing very democratic about the life of the Israelites or Jesus' followers or the early church. I'm not saying democracy is a bad thing, just not biblical. But the real point I'm trying to make is that I think American Christians have lost a lot of our "saltiness" because our religion has been coopted by American politics. Christians have been in the majority here for a long, long time and so we've understood ourselves to have a lot of influence, if not outright power, in the way this country is governed.

But that's no longer true. It's obvious to everyone. And as much as we might lament the escalating decline in numbers of church-goers, this moment in our history is also an opportunity for Christians and the Church to regain some of our saltiness. The time has come for us to remember what our true mission and message is and to let that shine into all the corners, cracks and crevices that have been left to crumble, grow moldy and fall apart in the shadows.

In chapter 58 of Isaiah, the prophet speaks pretty harshly to the religious people of Israel. They had a national religion, Judaism, but the way Isaiah saw it being practiced was just for show. Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases the beginning of chapter 58 in *The Message*: (this is God speaking)

Shout! A full-throated shout!  
Hold nothing back—a trumpet-blast shout!

Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,  
face my family Jacob with their sins!  
They're busy, busy, busy at worship,  
and love studying all about me.

To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—  
law-abiding, God-honoring.  
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'  
and love having me on their side.

But they also complain,  
'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?  
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

In other words, they think by performing religious practices, by fasting and praying, that God will look upon them with pride and pleasure and help them restore their nation that had been

decimated by Babylonian invaders. In other words, they, too, were hoping to make their country great again and invoking God's name to do it. And Isaiah is quick to let them know that just practicing the rituals of the religion will not help. The "fast" that God is interested in is not one in which they just refrain from eating, but one in which they put their own selfish desires and goals aside and start working for the poor and oppressed.

Again, I can't say it better than Eugene Peterson does:

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:  
sharing your food with the hungry,  
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,  
being available to your own families.  
Do this and the lights will turn on,  
and your lives will turn around at once....  
"If you get rid of unfair practices,  
quit blaming victims,  
quit gossiping about other people's sins,  
If you are generous with the hungry  
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,  
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,  
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight....  
You'll be like a well-watered garden,  
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.  
You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,  
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.  
You'll be known as those who can fix anything,  
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,  
make the community livable again."

Do this and the lights will turn on. Your lives will glow in the darkness.

That was Isaiah's charge and Isaiah's promise to the religious people of Jerusalem in the century, BCE. It's the same message Jesus wanted his disciples to embody in the first century. Let it be a clarion call for us people of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I'm convinced it's exactly what Jesus means when he points to you and me and says, "YOU are the light of the world. YOU are the salt of the earth."

Let's be that in this time and place for a world that is desperate for salt and light.