

“LITTLE THINGS WITH BIG MEANING: III – SALT”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Mother’s Day

Psalm

Matthew 5:13-15

Many of you know that I like to watch the television show Jeopardy. I’m pretty competitive and I like to see how well I can do compared to the contestants. Well, if any of you have been watching Jeopardy this week, you know that I would have fared pretty badly, because this week they replayed the tournament featuring the greatest three players of all time. They were incredible.

This week notwithstanding, I still love testing my skills on that show. And if you’re like me, and have watched Jeopardy for a long, long time, you know that there are some categories that appear rather regularly, and if you want to win, you’d better have at least cursory knowledge of those topics. For instance, you’d better know something about mythology (that shows up all the time), classical music and sometimes opera, literature and history, and yes, even Bible categories show up pretty regularly. And another thing that shows up pretty regularly are questions about word origins or origins of common phrases.

Which brings me to today’s Gospel lesson, for within it is a phrase that we use pretty commonly – “salt of the earth.” To say that someone is the salt of the earth means that they, according to one dictionary, “represent the best and noblest of society.” When we describe someone with those words, we’re saying that they are good and honest, upright, trustworthy. We would trust them with our lives.

Well, if that phrase came up on Jeopardy, and you were asked to name its origin, all you would have to do is answer this morning’s Gospel lesson – Matthew 5, verse 13. That’s where it comes from – Jesus’ words that he spoke as part of the Sermon on the Mount.

So let’s look to the origin of this phrase and see what it meant then and what it means for us now. By this point in Matthew’s Gospel, chapters four and five, Jesus has gained quite a following. Matthew points out that Jesus has done a fair amount of teaching, preaching and healing, and word has spread far and wide. People have come from all over to be near him, to watch him and listen to him.

And so it is that, on this day, a great crowd has gathered, and Jesus goes up on a mountain with his disciples and he begins to teach, and as he does, he says some of his most remembered words of all. He starts out with what we now call

“The Beatitudes,” blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, and so on.

And then, in verse 13, he changes tack. Up until then, he was talking about who was blessed and why and what they would receive from God. Now, it seems, he’s issuing an invitation to his listeners. “You are the salt of the earth.”

Now, it seems, he wants them to do something, not just sit and listen or gather to watch, but to do something. And in order to get them to do that, he first starts by reminding them of who they are – “you are the salt of the earth.”

You need to know that the people gathered around Jesus that day heard those words in a way much, much different from how we hear them today. Because salt in that day was incredibly, incredibly valuable. It was, of course, the way food was preserved. It was also used for many other things, including currency at times. It was that valuable. (Actually – side note – the word salary actually comes from the word salt – which shows you really how valuable salt was back then.) It’s been reported that wars were fought over salt, because salt was in high demand and hard to acquire.

Salt, in Jesus’ day, literally help to sustain life. So when Jesus said to those people they were the salt of the earth, he was giving them the highest compliment possible. They were, each one of them, of infinite value and worth.

I’m sure they needed to hear that, because truth be told, we all need to hear that every once in a while. The world has a way of knocking us down, of making us feel like we’re only valuable, we’re only worth something if we can prove it, if we have something to show for it – a high paying job, multiple degrees, a big house, a fancy care. I’m sure people in Jesus’ day were judged by others in somewhat the same way too.

So they needed to hear, and we need to hear Jesus’ words of affirmation. You are the salt of the earth because God created you and loves you and values you. And because you are the salt of the earth, you have something to offer, something the world needs – it needs your saltiness!

One pastor commented that salt “brings pleasure and tastiness to life.” I think that’s what Jesus was inviting those around him to do, to be the salt that brings pleasure and tastiness to life for others. How could they do it? They could do it because they knew about God’s love, and abundant life, and health and wholeness and healing. They knew about the God who could make a way when there didn’t seem to be a way. They knew about the God who, in Christ, made the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dead to rise. They knew about abundant life because they had seen Jesus live it and invite them to live it too. These “salty”

people gathered around Jesus were now being invited by him to share what they knew in their hearts with others, for Jesus knew that the world around them sorely needed it.

And friends, our world sorely needs it too. Our world, especially right now, sorely needs us to be who God has made us to be – “the salt of the earth.” Living in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic is scary and flat, if you will, doing all it can to draw the joy and richness out of life.

You know, when I’m not watching Jeopardy, I like to watch shows on the Food Network, especially the competitions. It doesn’t make me a better cook, I just like to watch them create amazing things. And I want to tell you something, those cooks use salt in abundance, not over-much, but in abundance, and their explanation for using it? They always say that “the salt brings out the flavor in the food.”

So too, I think Jesus would say, the salt brings out the flavor in life. So that’s the role of disciples of Christ, to be the salt that we are and help to bring out the flavor in life for ourselves and for others. The opportunities to do that are all around us, every single day, and as I said, so ready to be fulfilled especially right now. People around us need hope and joy, and we can give it to them, because we know it ourselves in Jesus Christ.

As I prepared this sermon all week long, and had this particular phrase – the salt of the earth – uppermost in my mind, I began to see a lot of salty people at work. Let me tell you about a few of them. You might have heard these stories too.

Did you hear about the teenage girl who wrote a thank you note to her mailman? Of course, she’s stuck inside like all of us, but inside of constantly being on the computer, she’s handwriting notes to her family and friends. So she wrote this thank you note to her mailman whose name is Doug Scott, in which she said, “The reason you are very important in my life is because I don’t have a phone so how else am I supposed to stay in touch with my friends? You make it possible.”

Well, the next day, this girl whose name is Emerson got a package in the mail with two notes and stamps inside. One note was from Doug and the other was from his supervisor, both thanking Emerson and letting them know how touched they were by her letter. (As you probably know, the postal service is under a lot of pressure these days and very often on the receiving end of bad publicity.) So what a wonderful thing this was!

Well, the story doesn’t end there. Soon after, Emerson started getting notes from postal workers – two boxes of them from postal workers around the country! You see how badly the world needs some salt?!

And the story still doesn't end. Emerson is, each week, writing notes to twenty-five of those who wrote to her, just to keep the goodwill going. Emerson, an 11 year old, who has embraced her saltiness!

If you didn't know Emerson's story, perhaps you heard of the teacher in New England who's taking care of a newborn baby. It's not her baby, but the brother of one of her elementary school students. Here's what happened. The mother, father and brother all tested positive for Covid 19, and the mother gave birth to a beautiful little baby and there was no one to care for him. So the father picked up the phone and called his son's teacher, not knowing what else to do.

Bear in mind, that the teacher, whose name is _____, had only met the parents at parent/teacher conferences, so she didn't know them well, but well, she was "salty" and she took that precious newborn into her house, until the parents and brother recover from the coronavirus. In doing so, she's showing all of them and indeed, the world, the way life in Christ is meant to be – full, abundant, sacrificial, loving.

I'm telling you, everywhere I looked this week, I saw "saltiness." And not just on the news, but right here in our midst. I talked to one of our members recently who said she was talking to someone else in the church and commented during their phone call that she hadn't been able to find hand sanitizer anywhere at all, and then, not long after that, went to her front door and found that her friend from church had left a gift for her – yep, you guessed it – hand sanitizer! A big deal, not perhaps in the grand scheme of things, but a sign of the kind of love Christ calls us to share – it sure brought joy and, in fact, safety to one woman's life.

The other day I spent some time with my mother as she recovers from her leg surgery, and I was there when the mail arrived, and it was filled with cards from so many of you, cards of love and encouragement. They offer her hope in a difficult time, and a reminder of the love of Christ that comes through the people of our church.

Finally, one more "salty" story. This one brought a great smile to my face, and I know many others of you probably saw it on Facebook. Most of you know that both Barbara and Al Bacon has been battling the coronavirus. Thankfully, they're both getting better day by day. Barbara is hospitalized, but Al has been home the entire time. Well, the other day Al was telling his daughter Deb Ingram that he was hungry for MacDonalds, a sure sign he was feeling better! So Deb and her family went and got him a Big Mac, among other things. Of course, with the restrictions on visits to the complex where the Bacons live, the Ingrams knew they'd have to leave the food at the front desk, and who knew how long it would take to arrive at Al's door? So what did they do? Al, took a rope and threw it down over the balcony, three stories up – they tied the MacDonalds' bag to the rope, and Al pulled

it up and enjoyed a hot Big Mac with no doubt, a great big smile on his face. Now, is that some earth-shattering thing? No. But I think it's a good bit of saltiness through brought out the flavor of love and care and healing and health. And it brought a smile not only to Al and the Ingrams, but to so many of us who watched it on Facebook.

Dear friends, you are the salt of the earth. Especially in these tough days, spread your saltiness around – or, as the hymn we're about to sing says – dance, then, wherever you may be! In whatever ways you can, big or little, share the love and life you know in Christ with others that they may know life in abundance too! May it be so.

Amen.