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Salt, Light, and Righteousness

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Salt is the stuff of life, and has been since the most ancient of days. Long before salt was just another spice in cupboards or a seasoning on dinner tables, salt was revered, coveted, and exalted. Not just battles, such as in the Civil War, but entire wars have been fought over salt. Salt was so valuable it was used as a form of compensation, like money. Religions around the world have used salt in ceremonies, especially for purification rites. Superstitions claim salt will protect a person from various forms of evil. Salt was symbolic of covenant relationships in the Old and New Testaments between God and God's people. Salt was a preservative in the long-ago days before refrigeration was ever imagined. Healers used salt as a healing agent.

Books have been written about salt. Salt has been featured in documentaries. To this day there are successful businesses that sell salt for seasoning, healing, and melting ice and snow, which means it isn't always such a bad thing to trample salt beneath our feet. Just google the word salt and see for yourself the colorful, dramatic, dynamic, and important impact salt has had on history, humankind, and life itself. So maybe salt isn't just the stuff of life, but some of the very best stuff of life.

Light has been since the very beginning. Way back when God created the heavens and the earth the first thing the author of the Book Genesis told us God created was light, and how God saw the Light was good. Throughout the Old and New Testaments light is used theologically as a way to distinguish between the light of God and the darkness of chaos or the darkness of evil. We also know light to be invaluable to us in the physical world. Light is what makes it possible for us to see everything from words on a page to the people we love to beautiful works of art or the beauty of nature. Light, we learn in the science of physics, can be measured and studied and can help us discover more about the mysteries of the universe. Light can be a comfort or inspiration, such as the light of the stars shining in the night sky, or the sunrise after so many long days of gray dismalness. Light is required for a person's physical, mental, and emotional well-being as studies have proven deprivation of light can have detrimental effects to a person. Light can also be powerful, light can blind a person who looks directly at a strong source of light. Whether you consider light from a theological, philosophical, scientific, or a combination of those perspectives, it is hard to deny the power and importance of light.

So salt is some of the best stuff of life. And light is good. And in today's Gospel, which is a continuation of Jesus' long Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called those who follow him salt and light; the best stuff of life and the first thing God called good. Such words might sound complimentary, but they can also carry a heavy burden of high expectations. Notice Jesus didn't say his followers were to try to be salt and light, they weren't called to be salt and light, they already are salt and light. That means they are the very best stuff of life and God sees the goodness of them, and that can come with some hefty expectations, expectations that can feel overwhelming or impossible for any person to live into on their own, which is why in our Gospel today Jesus also talked about his role in the relationship between him and his followers. Specifically, his role in fulfilling the law. It is important to remember that Jesus didn't intend to demolish the law God gave God's people back in the days of Moses when Moses delivered the 10 Commandments to the newly freed Israelites. Instead, Jesus came to fulfill the law so that his followers could embody it in their lives without fear of failure.

That means followers of Jesus can live the law, which Jesus summed up as "Loving God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." If you look at the arch of the Old Testament stories, it was always God's hope that God's people would show God to the parts of the world that did not know God and let the light of God shine for others to see. One way God gave God's people the tools to do that was the law. God's hope was that by living the law God's people would show the world what God is. However, that didn't always happen. The people had a hard time following the Commandments, and got confused, tried to make the commandments more specific so they'd be easier to follow, and ended up being more concerned about following the rules the right way than remembering the commandments were supposed to help everyone see God. Sometimes it got so complicated the people created religious positions so a group of religious professionals could follow the rules for them, that is part of how the Pharisees came into being.

One way of helping to alleviate that kind of burden, we can read in the Gospels, is Jesus, who by fulfilling the law through his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, didn't free his followers or us from the law, but gave us all a new relationship with God, one that frees us to live into what had been God's intention from the start: for God's people to live in such a way that everyone and everything can see and know God. To see people loving God with their whole being, and loving their neighbors as themselves and realize they are invited into that relationship too.

These aren't just pretty words from long ago days. They are words as potent as salt and light today, and they are for all of us, for you and me. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has written that it is the lay people, not ordained clergy, who are God's hope for the world. The clergy are the servants of that hope. Which means today's Gospel can remind us that you "are God's hope for the world." You are salt. You are Light.

That's what righteousness is all about: being salt and light. Righteousness is a good Old Testament word that means being morally just, having integrity, the mark of righteousness is when a person's words and actions both reflect loving God and loving our neighbor. So when Jesus challenged his followers to live lives of righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees he very well could have challenging his followers to be God's hope for the world instead of letting the religious elite do it for them. That same challenge to live such righteousness is for you and me today.

For some of you that might sound empowering and exciting. For others that might sound intimidating, overwhelming, or confusing. We might all wonder what righteousness might look like, especially because it is tempting to hear echoes of the negative term "self-righteousness" which means a lifting up of personal rightness. But righteousness is more positive: it just means saying words and doing actions that show the love of God with our whole self and loving neighbors as ourselves. How that might look in our individual lives might be as individual as we are.

I saw a scene in a movie once that captured the concept of righteousness perfectly for me. The movie is called *The Woman in Gold* and is based on the true story of one woman's quest to get back a painting that once belonged to her family (who are Jewish) before they fled Nazi Germany and went to America. The scene that spoke to me of righteousness was a flashback to the woman, much younger, newly married, and her new husband running away from Nazi soldiers who were chasing them as they attempted to escape to America. If the couple was caught, they would not only never make it to America but would most likely end up in a concentration camp. The chase scene included the rooftop of a building where the couple ran past an older woman hanging laundry on a line. This woman was completely unremarkable. She was not a stunning beauty. She was not dressed elegantly. She was not singing joyfully. Instead she sort of blended into the dull gray rooftop. As the couple approached, the woman didn't say a word to them. She didn't even stop what she doing. She simply nodded her head in a direction. And the couple ran off in that direction. Only a few seconds later, the Nazi soldiers came running and met the same unremarkable woman hanging laundry. The woman noticed the soldiers. She didn't say a word. She didn't even stop what she was doing. She simply nodded her head in a direction that happened to be the opposite direction she had indicated to the

Jewish couple. And the soldiers took off. I don't know if this scene was dramatic license or really happened, but to me the unremarkable woman exemplified righteousness, she showed the love of God and the love of neighbor in helping her neighbors, people she might not have even known, escape certain death.

You and I might not have an opportunity like the woman on the roof from the movie, but the reason I was so struck by her righteousness was how simple it was. She did what she could in a situation where there wasn't much else she could do. She didn't have the means to hide the couple, she couldn't fight the soldiers, she did what she could do and it made a big difference. She was salt. She was light. I believe that is where righteousness starts: with what a person can do.

That reminder can be empowering when we encounter our own opportunities to be salt and light and live such exceeding righteousness. When you encounter negativity or fear for the future, you can choose to go along with that or you can see the opportunity to do what you can to live righteously by listening, and lifting up what can be done. As a parish, we have created opportunities to serve righteously when we serve lunch every Wednesday. When we open the chapel. When we share our building with our OU neighbors. And in these days when there is so much talk about so much anger in the world and so much division in the world, when any of us encounter such worldly anger or divisions I hope we all remember that we, that you and I are God's hope for the world. I hope you remember you are salt. You are the very best stuff of life. I hope you remember that you are light. You carry within you the very same light from the beginning. And it is good. And however you choose to respond to any person or situation you encounter that I hope you choose the righteousness that shows the love of God and the love of neighbors. For I am convinced there is more to the world than anger and division, and as God's hope for the world you and I together can let the light of God shine on all that is and perhaps let the salt of God heal some wounds and bring hope to world, and let that hope grow into God's kingdom here on earth.