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Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”

Jesus wasn’t being complimentary here. He was being challenging. These are not descriptions – they are mandates. He’s not saying, “because you have these attributes, you are my disciples.” He’s saying, “because you are my disciples, you must be these things.”

So what exactly does he mean? Let’s start with salt. In the ancient Jewish world, salt had several uses. Obviously, it was used to preserve and season food – with preservation probably being more important than flavor – and both of these were important. But in addition, salt had several ritual uses.

The conquerors of various cities in Canaan would, according to the Biblical accounts, raze the defeated cities to the ground and then salt the earth. Since salt would prevent anything from growing for a long time, this was one way of making sure the people stayed down. Of course, killing them all, which was also part of the process, was an effective method of doing that, too, and didn’t use up a valuable resource in the land. The other reason for salting the ground of a defeated enemy, at least on the part of the Israelites, was to consecrate it to God.

Salt was also used ritually in sacrifices and in Temple worship, and is actually required by Jewish law.

Leviticus 2:13 states, “You shall not omit from your grain-offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”

And Ezekiel 43:24 says, “You shall present them before the Lord, and the priests shall throw salt on them and offer them up as a burnt-offering to the Lord.”

Then, Exodus 30:34-35 says, “The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy…”

Outside of the Temple, yet another ritual use of salt was to rub a newborn baby with salt. This was supposed to signify that a child would be raised with integrity and truth, but it may have also had the practical purpose of killing bacteria.

And finally, there is the biblical concept of the “salt covenant.” We see it in Numbers 18:19, where God says to Aaron, “It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD for both you and your offspring.” And Second Chronicles 13:5 says, “Don't you know that the LORD, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt?”

This is an offshoot of the use of salt in hospitality. Salt was a valuable commodity in the Middle East, and to share it with someone was to offer a more than casual friendship to them. It was to form a covenant bond with them – an unbreakable, lifelong commitment.

So what Jesus is telling his disciples here, is that they are part of a covenant – the binding agent in fact. But in order to be that, they have to remain pure. Salt that has lost its flavor is kind of hard to understand, I think. Salt – sodium chloride – is salt. In order for it to stop tasting like salt, it would have to stop being salt.

But this is coming from the perspective of someone who has grown up with Morton’s allher life. Ancient salt, especially salt from the Dead Sea in Palestine, would rarely have been one hundred percent pure. They scraped it up off of the ground, after all, and it certainly would be possible to scrape other things up along with it. Things that don’t taste so good. So it’s not that the salt loses its flavor, but rather that other things contaminate it and hide the essential saltiness.

The Greek word translated as “lost its taste” is “*moraine.*” Another translation of that word, in fact the first translation listed, is “to make foolish” or “to render useless.” So this is salt that is useless for its intended purposes of seasoning, preserving, and sealing of covenants.

So what kinds of things would make this particular salt useless? Things like religious intolerance, bigotry, boredom, anger, indifference, and fear, for example. Things we encounter, and maybe take part in, every day through media and the internet, at work, at school, or even in our homes. These are the things we must constantly be on guard against, lest we lose our effectiveness as Christians.

This is not to say that we have to be perfect, or that God can’t work with us in spite of our flaws, but Jesus is telling us here that we must always strive to be pure salt.

Let’s move on to light. In Genesis, on that first day, after God had created the heavens and the earth, the very next thing he did was to create light. In that Genesis story, God creates light on the first day and humankind on the last day – two bookends encompassing everything else on earth – and here Jesus brings the two together. We ARE that light.

We in the 21st century take light for granted. Until, of course, the wind or snow takes out our electricity, which I’m thankful hasn’t happened to Michael and me yet. I know many of you have lost power on more than one occasion, though, and it’s a really pain in the neck.

But in first century Palestine, light was either daylight or oil lamps at night. There were no street lights or other ambient light. It would be DARK. Maybe even as dark as it is in South Dakota in the dead of night!

And obviously, if you were bothering to light a lamp at night, using up valuable resources, you wouldn’t cover it up once it was lit. Instead you would put it high up so that the light would reach to all corners of the house. To cover up a lamp once it had been lit would be wasteful and counterproductive, and eventually result in the lamp going out. And just like there are many ways to render salt useless, there are plenty of ways to cover that light. John’s prologue tells us that darkness can’t overcome the light of God, but it sure can seem to hide it for a time.

I sometimes think that churches should have been built in the shape of bushel baskets, rather than upside down ships, because so many times you never see any light coming out of them. They could be lovely communities inside, but unwelcoming and isolated from the outside. The light of the world, Jesus says, must not be hidden from the world it seeks to enlighten.

Likewise, a city built high up on a hillside can’t hope to be hidden. On the contrary, it would be visible from far away, even before some of the intervening landscape.

A million years ago, when I was living in France, I went on a pilgrimage to Chartres. Chartres is a medieval town a bit southeast of Paris, which has, among other things, an amazing cathedral. When you’re walking, as we were, or driving towards Chartres, the cathedral is the first thing you see over the horizon, sticking up out of the fields like a beacon, as I’m sure its builders intended.

The term “city on the hill” was used in a sermon by the Puritan leader John Winthrop, given to bolster up that first batch of Puritans about to embark on their trip to the new world. In the intervening 400ish years, the term has come to be a symbol of what people thought was the pride and arrogance of the Puritans – a perfect city that excluded everyone else. In fact, what it means, if you look at it in the context of the rest of Winthrop’s sermon, is NOT perfection, but a city that’s visible to everyone, with all of its faults in plain sight.

So taking all three of Jesus’ metaphors together, he’s telling us that we are in an essential, covenantal relationship with the whole earth, that we, by following Jesus are the human manifestation of God’s creative and redeeming light, and that we, and our actions, must be open to everyone’s scrutiny, criticism, and possibly even attack.

A far cry from any kind of a compliment!

Last week, because of the Feast of the Presentation, we missed reading the passage in Matthew that comes right before this one. That passage is Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes. I’m going to read them to you now, because they pertain directly to today’s Gospel.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the humbly devout, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

"Blessed are the gentle and mild, for they will inherit the earth.

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

"Blessed are the compassionate and those full of pity, for they will receive God’s mercy.

"Blessed are the innocent and guiltless in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be invited to be children of God.

"Blessed are those who are hunted down and persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you, because people may hate and insult you, and may hunt YOU down and persecute you, and may tell all kinds of evil lies against you on account of me. Rejoice and be full of joy, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This is not a list of sad sacks who have to put up with a lot of hardship, but who will ultimately get their reward in heaven. This is a list of desirable attributes that Jesus would like to see in his followers. And to make that point perfectly clear, he makes the last beatitude, which is the most ominous, personal. Blessed are YOU because people may hate and insult you and persecute you and lie about you. Blessed are YOU, because this is exactly what happened to the prophets who came before you. Blessed are YOU because you are fulfilling God’s purpose!

And then, in order to get the job done, in the next verse, he tells them that they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city on the hill. THEY are – not the Pharisees, nor even the prophets who came before. THEY are.

WE are.

We are all those things. We are called by Jesus to be his body on earth, and to fulfill God’s plan to bring about his Kingdom. It’s our job to make sure that salt stays pure, to make sure that light remains uncovered, and to make sure that city on the hill is visible for all the world to see.

Or in other words, to fast forward in Matthew a bit, we are called to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to care for the sick, and to visit those in prison. We are. It’s up to us – no one else. And we will, with God’s help.

Amen.