



The New England Church Pulpit

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DINNER AT ROBIN HOOD

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Matthew 5.13-16

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. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket, but rather sets it on a lampstand so it can give light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.

Several years back, the children at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago were asked to help with an experiment to know something experientially of the metaphor Jesus used in this passage. The teachers fixed two big bowls of popcorn, one with salt and one without. The kids were asked to try both and decide which they preferred. Of course, the popcorn with salt won the day, and the children learned by application how the things they say and do can make the world a tastier, better place for people. (Rev. John Buchanan, from his sermon "To Make the World Better," Feb 3, 2008)

Salt and light are the images Jesus used to speak of life. Two very powerful metaphors, these. Both are active entities in making life more fulfilling, more enjoyable, more equitable, for salt and light change things, and therefore make a big difference in the world.

These days, salt doesn't play well because we are being told that salt, and particularly too much salt, is the enemy. And to be sure, we have to watch our intake of sodium chloride if we are to take care of our bodies as temples of God. But we have to also admit that most of the time, food tastes better with at least a bit of salt on it.

Episcopal Priest and author Robert Capon is both a good theologian and a gourmet cook. He writes in his book *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*:

Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet, at our best, we know better. Butter glorifies everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you get not sudden death, but Hollandaise, which in its own way is not less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, or a Bach fugue.

(Preface, p xiii)

Salt and light. The context of these metaphors used by Jesus in Matthew's gospel leads us into the internal dialogue that occurs throughout the Bible. On the one hand, there are those who define religion as adhering to the religious law, practicing the rituals, praying, fasting, sacrificing. It is the religion of the temple. On the other hand, there are those in the Bible who define religion on the

basis of the good it influences in our daily lives, the kind of religion that advocates for the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. If the former is labeled the Religion of the Temple, the latter might be labeled the Religion of the Streets, Homes, and Marketplaces. The priest represents one; the prophet the other. Neither can exist well without the other. It isn't a choice of either/or; it's a practice of both/and. We need temple religion to center our lives in God and street religion to center our lives in others. (Buchanan, "To Make the World Better.")

Real religion, the prophet Isaiah tells us, is known in those activities and beliefs that manifest themselves in the world becoming a better, kinder, more equitable place for everyone. Taking up the cause of the refugee, taking up the plight of the homeless and the hungry, advocating for women's rights, tutoring those children who need extra help to understand their lessons, and providing mental health care for the man so laden with depression he doesn't move from his bed for days on end. When you loose the bonds of justice, and feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless, and provide health care for the masses, "your light will break forth like the dawn," Isaiah says. You are the light on a hill, a light that is not hid, but which shines in the darkest places of both the soul and the world's back alleys to bring hope and peace. You are the salt of the earth. Salt and light.

But, responds Rev. Eugene Peterson, "[being salt, being light] is not the American way. The great American innovation in congregations is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. We Americans have developed a culture of acquisition... It didn't take long for some of our brothers and sisters to develop consumer congregations. The quickest way to get people to our churches [and fund our programs] is to identify what they want and give it to them... the gospel in consumer terms: entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, problem-solving, whatever. But there is one thing wrong, he says: it is not the way God brings us into conformity with the life and teachings of Jesus.

(Buchanan "To Make the World Better.")

In a nutshell, Peterson says, we're like those Pharisees who were upright citizens but so ensconced in temple worship for its own sake, it was an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Jesus taught us to pray "God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." What is that kingdom like? Jesus told stories about the wounded man lying beside the road, passed up by the religious leaders, but helped by one who was despised in that society, a racial minority, a refugee, who shows us what a neighbor looks like. He told about a gracious father who was so besotted with love for his rebellious son that he opened his arms to him when he came home. Jesus welcomed the unwanted, the unwelcomed, the unclean. He touched the sick, the lepers, the grieving, the dead and laughed in the face of death. He gathered children in his arms and elevated women to the category of human being with rights and gifts in a time when children and women were lower than dogs on the socially-acceptable scale.

The recent Women's March that occurred around the world has become the rallying metaphor for women's rights in a world that wants to put women back a century or two. Their sheer numbers and the mission statement by which they march forward is salt of the earth. I'm always proud to tell people that this church gave women equal rights in voting when we first organized in 1858, 62 years before women were given the right to vote in this nation. But the right to vote nationally was hard-won; they had to stage sit-ins, and demonstrations, and all manner of attention-getting activities to get what Jesus said they should have had 2000 years ago. Salt of the earth; light of the world.

On a frigid winter night, a man wearing two coats shuffles into a brightly lit brick restaurant in downtown Madrid. Staff greet him warmly; he's been there many times. The maître d' stamps his ID card, and the hungry man selects a table with a red tablecloth, under a big brass chandelier.

The man, Luis Gallardo, is homeless—and so are all of the diners, every night, at Madrid's Robin Hood restaurant. Its mission is to charge the rich and feed the poor. Paying customers at breakfast and lunch foot the bill for the restaurant to serve dinner to homeless people, free of charge. It's not so much robbing the rich to give to the poor, as did that hero of old, but of knocking on the door of human decency to invite the well-fed to provide for others what they themselves take for granted. Salt of the earth. Light of the world.

What's amazing is that the Robin Hood restaurant has become Spain's most sought-after lunch reservation. The restaurant has poached staff from luxury hotels. Celebrity chefs are lining up to cook once a week. It's so popular among paying customers, you can't get a lunch reservation now until April.

The restaurant, which is run by an 80-year-old Catholic priest, Angel Gracia Rodriguez, opened in early December, 2016. Known as Padre Angel to everyone who comes into the restaurant, this priest manager wants homeless people to "eat with the same dignity as any other customers. And of the same quality food, with glasses made of crystal, not plastic, and in an atmosphere of friendship and conversation." Salt of the earth. Light of the world.

When National Public Radio interviewed Gallardo, the double-coated homeless man, he said the meal reminded him of Christmases past, before the accounting firm he was in charge of went bankrupt and he had to lay off 60 employees, including himself. He eventually had to sell his house to pay debts. Now he lives on the street, sleeping in ATM machine alcoves. (from an online article by NPR).

As an aside, by contrast, go see the movie *The Founder*, and you will see what Jesus meant by salt losing its flavor and being trampled on underfoot. It is a story in stark contrast to the Robin Hood, where a business shark snuffs out of existence the small guy to create an empire to one's own glory. It's a sad business. This is a light hidden under an ego.

Salt and light. When we gather in this room week after week to pray and sing, to laugh and cry together, we encourage one another in our saltiness, in our light-ness. The world works diligently to trample the salt, to snuff out the light, but we encourage ourselves here that each person is a beacon of light with a special gift which may be as modest as our ability to hug a child or feed a neighbor. As we eat and drink at God's table, nourishing body, mind, and spirit, we hear the words again: live in such a way that your life brings out the flavor and joy of life. Live in such a way that your life brightens others' lives. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Once again, O God, we gather in this place to center our minds and focus our hearts on things that matter, to remind ourselves of our calling to be salt of the earth and light in the world. With all of its sham and drudgery, its broken dreams and conflicting voices, its violence and hatred, it is still a beautiful world. We thank you for the blessings of the week past, for the sun overhead even when we couldn't see it; for stars that shone at night, even when clouds blocked our view; and even for the cold and dark dreariness of winter, without which there would be no spring flowers. We thank you for bitter medicine and painful surgeries that heal; for the misfortunes without which we could never grow wise or know the meaning of true joy. Life is a mystery, and you, dear God, are the biggest mystery of all, for which we give thanks.

In the coming week, keep us unfaltering in our hope, affectionate in our love and kindness, and faithful to our calling to enjoy life as we give opportunities for others to enjoy life. Keep us humble that we may continue to grow in our understanding of ourselves and the people around us. Keep us joyful that even amid pain and sorrow we will find peace. Keep our eyes open, our ears alert, and our hands and feet ready to respond to the needs of others even while we find our rest in you.

Hear our prayer for those who are cold and hungry, that they may be fed. Grateful for agencies and people who keep them going so those without can have something to sustain them. Hear our prayers for the weary and heavy-laden that they may find peace. Hear our prayers for the sick, the homebound, and the grieving that they may be comforted. And we pray for those who are wronged by social systems, leaders, and laws that they may not be diminished by bitterness.

As the new year continues, remind us that we are loved for being who we are, even as we are loved in spite of who we are. Give us courage to act justly, to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves, to give ourselves over to being salt in the world and light to the earth by our deeds. In the name of the one who calls us, Amen.