

WE ARE CHARGED WITH A SALT!

Sermon, February 5, 2017

Texts: Isaiah 58; Matthew 5:13-20

Watching the television coverage of the "protesting" (*actually, rioting and thuggery*) in Berkeley and, on a bit of a lesser scale, in New York this week reminded me of a story I read of the scene of another "protest" (*actually, a riot*) from twenty five years ago; it was the portrayal of one particular interview with a "protester" that stood out in my mind ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. It's hard for me to believe it's already been a quarter of century since the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Some of you remember; they were sparked by a controversial verdict involving the filmed 1991 forceful subduing of Rodney King by LAPD officers following a high speed pursuit. Following the verdict, the violence and mayhem continued three days. Governor Pete Wilson dispatched four thousand National Guard troops. People stayed home for fear of venturing out, watching on television with the rest of the country as live coverage showed fires raging throughout the city, innocent bystanders assaulted, a trucker beaten senseless after being pulled from the cab of his truck, looters shattering windows and sacking department stores and other businesses. The final toll was devastating: Fifty-three people were killed, over four thousand were injured, twelve thousand (!) were arrested, and there was well over \$1 billion in property damage.

In the thick of those riots a brave NBC reporter by the name of Steve Futterman attempted to interview looters emerging from the broken doors and shattered windows of a downtown department store. He asked one looter, a particular "gentleman" with his arms full, "*What did you take?*" The young man, caught like a deer in headlights, replied, "*Nothin!*" and ran off. The same question to a second "protester" resulted in expletives I really can't repeat from the pulpit. Not giving up, the intrepid reporter pursued a third looter. "*What did you take?*" he asked. The looter replied, without a trace of irony, "*I got me some gospel music! I love Jesus!*"¹

Our Old Testament text might be appropriate for our looting Gospel music aficionado! Through the prophet Isaiah, God addresses people who live one way on Sunday and their own way the other days of the week ... people who give lip service to "loving Jesus," but certainly live otherwise. God accuses these people of insincerity because they worship and make promises on the Lord's day, but during the week there is no change for the better, no evidence of their Sabbath affirmations taking place in the living of their lives. He says, in so many words, "*Even on the day of your worship, you go out and do as you please. Then on Monday, you exploit your workers. On Tuesday, you spread gossip. On Wednesday you quarrel with your neighbors, on Thursday you withhold bread from the hungry, on Friday you overlook injustice, and on Saturday you're neglecting the little time you have to be with your family because you are 'working' so hard at your play. Because your weekday behavior bears so little resemblance to your Sabbath promise, your worship is a lie!*" As someone succinctly put it, our Monday is the proof of our Sunday. And, as Appolonia Corleone might put it, so is our "... Toosday, Thursday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday!"² Worship is about promise. It is about hearing the promises of God, and keeping our promises to God. Genuine worship is just *beginning* when I give the benediction.

One pastor I know always ended the service with a benediction and from time to time would give this *post-benediction*: "*The worship is over; the service has begun.*" It is as we leave the house of worship and go in service into the world beyond that the promises of worship are fulfilled. To work with integrity and industry, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To respect and safeguard the property and rights of others, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To struggle patiently and lovingly through family difficulties, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To act honestly when no one is looking, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To share with those in need, to do what we can to right what is wrong, to do all we can to do what is good and right and honorable and true, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To curb our tongues from malicious talk, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To do away with the pointing finger and to open our hands to the needy and the hungry, that's fulfilling the promises of worship. To "... *not turn away from your own flesh and blood (Isaiah 58:7b),*" that is fulfilling the promises of worship.

Here in Matthew, Jesus addressed those who genuinely profess love for Him ... not exactly the kind of people who would go out rioting and looting. As we highlighted a few weeks ago, Jesus is addressing His followers in the Sermon on the Mount; He addressed those disciples who, like you, took time out of their weeks to gather before Him to hear His words and seek His guidance, those who genuinely professed love for Him by word and action ... and He tells them and He tells you, "*You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.*" From the historical context of

¹ Reported in <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/whats-the-rush-victor-yap-sermon-on-moses-66484>

² see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXFQZi_sww

salt's value and vital importance, we have to see that Jesus was giving them high praise; He was *complimenting* His followers when He said to them, "You are the salt of the earth." In today's vernacular, He would be telling them, "You are as good as gold! You are precious, you are hard to find but valuable to discover; you are a necessary, vital and indispensable commodity in this world!" For in the ancient world, salt was as good as gold, it was something very special ... a treasured commodity, a precious substance, and at the same time a necessary and vital and indispensable product. Ancient trade routes were established because of salt; In fact, just about any time you read in history about the search for spices and wealth, the adventurers were not seeking parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme on their way to Scarborough Fair; merchants were seeking primarily the "spice" of salt. Ferdinand and Isabella sent Christopher Columbus off with strict orders to bring home boatloads of salt. At its height in the fifteenth century, Venice was beautiful, powerful, famous and fabulously rich. Though its wealth was attributed to the trade in spice, the fact is most of that spice was salt. Salzburg, Austria, that center of fine arts known to many of us as "The Sound of Music" town of Maria Von Trapp and family, was built around a *Salz* (German for "salt") mine. Part of a Roman's soldier's wage was a bag of salt ... hence the origin of the phrase, "a man worth his salt." A man "worth his salt" is a man who earned his keep. This is also the root origin of our word "sal-ary."

Precious as it was, salt would have been found in every home in the Palestine of Jesus' day. It was not just an inexpensive tabletop extra as it is in our homes today; it was a necessity, and probably the most valuable and expensive necessity, in the house. It was the best preservative in a world without refrigeration. People would rub salt into meat or fish, or would leave the meat or fish to soak in briny water, in order to preserve it ... because salt arrests the spread of bacteria. It was also commonly used as an antiseptic to stop the spread of germs; rubbing salt into a wound was actually a good thing to do ... it doesn't sound very pleasant, but it was very effective in fighting the decay and spread of infection. (BTW, today we have medicines and balms to do that job less painfully, so we don't need to rub salt into wounds anymore ... which may be part of the etymology of the idiom; when we say "don't rub salt into the wound" we are basically saying, "Enough already! You don't need to rub it in any more, so quit it and/or be quiet!") And though there was no electricity, they did have light ... oil lamps would be lit when the sun went down to dispel darkness in the home. And Jesus says to His disciples, He says to those who are conscientious enough to take time out of their weeks to gather there around Him to hear His words, He says to us ... "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!"

What does He mean? Well, besides the fact that He is paying His dedicated followers a huge compliment, conveying to them just how precious and rare they are, Jesus is giving them a charge, an assignment, a high calling (hence the hokey sermon title ... "We Are Charged With A Salt," more properly, we are charged by Jesus to go out and "be" salt!). Jesus means for His followers to permeate and penetrate and preserve and brighten up their community and society in the same manner as salt and light. To perform its preserving function, the salt has to get out of the shaker and go soak into the meat. To perform its illuminating function, the light has to shine out into the darkness. Jesus wants His disciples to influence and preserve and brighten up the world in which they live by the way they live, beginning right in their homes. Jesus equips and encourages and expects His followers to permeate their community as salt and light in order to make it *better*. "You are the ones!" Jesus says, who can hinder and even halt the degeneration of your culture just as salt hinders the degeneration of meat and fish. "You are the ones!" Jesus says, who can dispel the darkness of viciousness and vice from your community with the light of your faithful lives.

Without salt, meat rots. That is the nature of meat; that is what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. There is no sense in blaming the meat. The question to ask is, "Where is the salt?" (in a somewhat related vein, this past week I found a Tupperware container in my refrigerator the other night containing leftover roast beef from just after Thanksgiving ... needless to say, when I opened that container, I was almost knocked out by the odor. When left uncured, unsalted, that's what meat does; it rots. That's its nature.) Without the salty influence of Jesus' followers, the same happens to our culture. And without light, things get dark. That's what happens when the sun goes down. If culture becomes corrupt like a stinking roast or a darkened night, well, that's what happens when corrupting evil is allowed to go unrestrained and unchecked. Don't underestimate the power and influence that we as individual Christians can exert in the community and in our world. The salty influence of Jesus through His followers can do much to preserve human society and to hinder and even halt its decay, and it can do much to brighten up a darkened world. It has in the past, it will in the present, and it will continue to do so in the future. Again, Jesus has charged us with "A Salt" ... or, to *be* salt ... and may God increasingly enable and equip us to be salt and light in our world.

I end with this thought. Criminologists tell us no person enters and exits a room without leaving something of themselves behind. There will be a fingerprint, a footprint, a trace of hair, a thread of clothing or some DNA evidence that we have been there. As we come here to the Lord's Table today, I would like to slightly mix my metaphors and ask all of us as disciples of Jesus this question: What kind of evidence are we leaving behind in the world out there? Is it enough evidence to successfully convict us of Jesus' charge of "A Salt"?