

SOLE ET SALE

Sermon, February 16, 2020

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

I think this is the first time in my twenty-three plus years in this pulpit that I entitled the sermon in a different language. Sole Et Sale ... it's Latin. No, it is not referring to a sale on hand crafted Italian leather shoes ... soles on sale ... nor to a sale on some sort of fish ... filet of sole on sale. The full phrase is "Nil utilius sole et sale (*or, as expressed in one source, "Nil sole et sale utilius"*). It means, "Nothing is as useful as sun (*or sunshine*) and salt." I'm told it was a well known Roman proverb attributed to the philosopher statesman and one time naval and army commander, Pliny the Elder, friend of the emperor Vespasian, who would have been known by every Roman of Jesus time. It is quite probable this was a well-known proverb throughout the Empire, including this Roman occupied territory of Palestine; it is likely Romans and non-Romans alike were familiar with this common dictum, "Nothing is as useful as sun and salt." It's while in Roman occupied territory that Jesus alludes to this proverb to give His disciples a high compliment and a high calling. (*As a tip of the hat to Valentine's Day this past Friday, I should add the word "Sole" makes its appearance in the Italian love ballad, "O Sole Mio" ... My Own Sun, or Sunshine. A loose translation of some lyrics sung by the balladeer to his romantic interest standing under her balcony, "What a beautiful thing is a sunny day! But another sun, even more beautiful, o my sweetheart, o my own sun, shines from your face! This sun, o my own sun, Shines from your face: It shines from your face!" I guess it's something of precursor to Stevie Wonder's hit love ballad of the seventies, "You are the Sunshine of My Life."*)

As highlighted last week, Jesus is directly addressing His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. He is speaking to these faithful followers who, like you each Sunday, took time out of their weeks to gather before Him to hear His words and seek His guidance ... and He tells them and He tells you, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." Jesus is giving His disciples high praise and a high calling! Keeping in mind they all most likely knew that Roman proverb, Jesus says in so many words, "Nothing is more useful and beautiful and illuminating and life giving and life enhancing and as necessary to this world as salt and light ... and that is what you are!"

From the historical context of salt's value and vital importance alone, when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," He would be telling them in today's vernacular, "You are as good as gold! You are useful, you are precious, you are hard to find, you are valuable to discover; you are a necessary, vital and indispensable commodity in your world!" For in the ancient world, salt was as good as gold, it was something very special ... it was a treasured commodity, it was hard to find, it was a precious substance, and at the same time it was a vitally necessary and indispensable product. Today salt is plentiful and cheap; in that day, however, it wasn't. Ancient trade routes were established because of salt; some historians even argue that the growth of civilization grew out of the search for 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; they 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, the city of 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 and valuable 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 ... when we say "don't rub salt into the wound" we are basically saying, "Enough already! You don't need to do that any more, there are better ways to deal with injury and hurt today!"*)

And light. The need for light is obvious. Though there was no electricity, they did have man-made sources for light in that day and age... oil lamps would be lit when the sun went down to dispel darkness in the home. And Jesus says to His disciples,... "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 high compliment, He is also giving them a high calling, an

assignment, a charge ... you might say Jesus is "charging His disciples with a salt." More properly, He is charging them to go out and BE salt. Jesus means for His followers to permeate and penetrate and preserve and brighten up their community and homes 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 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 and decay and corruption 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?" 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 our culture becomes corrupt like a stinking roast or a darkened night, well, that's what happens when 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. Just as salt rubbed into or soaked into the meat and fish can arrest or hinder the process of decay, so Christians can and must act as salt to hinder social decay. Just as light shining into darkness dispels the darkness, so Christians can act as light, dispelling the darkness of viciousness and vice and sadness and sorrow from their community with the light of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Salt and light expose decay and darkness. If we are light, that means when our light comes into contact with other parts of the environment, it will show up other things for what they are. If you are a faithful Christian, if you are faithfully reflecting the values of the Light of the World, then just by contrast with your life and your words and even with your silences you illumine, you "show up" the dishonesty in the business, you reveal the gossip in the office, the racism in your neighborhood, the corruption in your political ward, and so on. Just simply by being a faithful Christian, by being faithful to the truth you know in Jesus Christ, your life makes other things apparent for what they are ... "light" makes the lying look like lying, it makes racism look like racism, it makes the promiscuity look like promiscuity, it makes the gossip look like gossip, it makes the corruption look like corruption. Just by saying "*I'm going to live according to the truth*" ... you are going to be a light that will reveal the reality of the environment by contrast. A good light shows up the real color. We joke about people wearing mismatching clothes by saying that maybe they got dressed in the dark; well, blue and black socks are easier to tell apart when there is better light. A good light shows the real colors all around. If you are a Christian, then the beauty of your life does that ... by contrast, by dispelling darkness, it shows everybody around what is good and what is bad.

Just a quick aside about the word "good" Jesus uses when He refers to good deeds ... there are basically two Greek words for "good," *agatos* and *kalos*. Both refer to good as in quality, beneficial, useful ... but *kalos* has the additional connotation of good as in honorable, praiseworthy, even beautiful. It is *kalos* that Jesus uses here. Your good deeds as in your beautiful deeds, your honorable and praiseworthy deeds, the kind of deeds that cause other people to comment, "*That's beautiful! That's good! That's amazing!*" And salt is not just a preservative; it's also a seasoning. It brings out the taste; it makes things taste *better*. Now, light can show up corruption, which can get you persecuted, and salt can sting as it works to stop decay ... yet at the same time, as salt resisting decay and dissipation and as light illuminating what is good and right, you are the joy in a particular group, you are the stability in your neighborhood, you are the glue in your office holding it all together, you are the anchor of stability in your family. In short, a Christian acting as salt and light says to him/herself, "*How can I bring out the best in this organization, out of this family, out of this community, out of any group of people in my influence? How can I make it better?*"

I end with this thought. Criminologists tell us no people can enter and exit 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 someone has been there. I would like to slightly mix 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 "A Salt"? Again, Jesus has charged us with "A Salt" ... or, to be salt, and light.

"*Nil utilius sole et sale*" ... may God increasingly enable and equip us to be salt and light in our world.