

CHARGED WITH A SALT ON THE SABBATH

Sermon, February 5, 2023

Texts: Isaiah 58; Matthew 5:13-20

It became national, indeed, international news a week ago Friday when video footage was released showing a January 7 'traffic stop' where five Memphis police officers yanked a 29 year old FedEx worker and father out of his car, then brutally punched, beat, kicked, pepper-sprayed, stun-gunned and baton-whipped him; three days later, Tyre Nichols died at the hospital. He was reportedly returning from a suburban park where he had taken photos of the sunset. The rogue cops were fired; all face second-degree murder charges (*I usually don't go into current news events with such detail, but this was particularly disturbing to me ... those of you who know me know that I'm definitely more of a "DEFEND the Police" advocate rather than a "DEFUND the Police" one, but these appeared to be thugs, not police ... but, I digress*). Although body cam video, as well as video from an outdoor camera, was released, no video was shown of the supposed traffic violation that allegedly caused the police to pull Nichol's vehicle over, sparking rumors this was more than just a routine traffic stop gone bad; this looked more ... personal. *"All my son was trying to do was come home,"* said Tyre's mother, who sobbed during the news conference and told reporters her son was less than eighty yards from home when this happened. Their attorney, Ben Crump, asserted this looked like THE most notorious incident of police brutality in American history. *"Regrettably, it reminded us of the Rodney King video,"* Crump said, *"but unlike Rodney King, Tyre didn't survive."* Nichols' stepfather, Rodney Wells, asked that if there are protests, that they remain peaceful, saying violence *"is not what Tyre wanted and won't bring him back."* Fortunately, peaceful protests did prevail, unlike the summer of 2020 or the ones thirty-one years ago in the wake of the Rodney King incident.

It's hard for me to believe it's already been over three decades since the Los Angeles riots. Many of you remember those riots, sparked on April 29, 1992, when twelve jurors rendered their verdicts in a controversial case involving the 1991 video-recorded beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers following a high speed pursuit. When the verdicts were read ... one officer was found guilty of excessive force; others were cleared of all charges ... rioting spread quickly throughout Los Angeles. The mayhem continued three full days. Governor Pete Wilson dispatched four thousand National Guard troops. Live TV 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 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 (*by comparison, \$1 billion is the published TOTAL estimate in damages of all the 500+ riots of 2020*). 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 running with his arms full, *"What did you take?"* The young man, reacting like a deer caught 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. The intrepid reporter pursued a third looter with arms full of booty. *"What did you take?"* he asked. The looter replied, without a trace of irony, *"I got me some gospel music! I love Jesus!"*

Our Gospel text for the day is about people who genuinely love Jesus, but hopefully in a more positive and constructive way. Our Old Testament text from Isaiah 58 is more appropriate for our looting Gospel music aficionado; God addresses people there who act one way on Sunday and their own way the other days of the week ... people who give lip service in worship, but live otherwise (*most of that part of my original sermon ended up on the editing room floor, as it was getting 'way too long*). 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 highlighted these past two weeks, Jesus is directly addressing His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. He is speaking to these faithful followers who, like you each Sunday, take 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! In 2011, I came across a little multiple choice quiz put out by the Morton Salt Company ... some of you may remember the answers, others of you will be hearing this for the first time.

- 1) What did Julius Caesar cherish most? (a) Friends, (b) Romans, (c) Countrymen, (d) Salt.

The answer is (d). In the ancient world, salt was as good as gold. It was a precious substance, hard to find and an eagerly desired necessity as well as a luxury. Ancient trade routes were established because of salt; when supplies ran out, empires fell. In fact, 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 of our word "sal-ary."

- 2) Which word comes from salt? (a) Salad, (b) Salary, (c) Salvation, (d) Salute.

Actually, the answer is all of the above, not just "b" as explained in #1. One might say the English language is "peppered" with words derived from and/or related to the word salt. As salt was such a vital and valued necessity in antiquity, it worked its way into many idioms and figures of speech, and from there into the common language.

- 3) Which of the following was Columbus trying to find? (a) Diamonds, (b) Rubies, (c) Salt, (d) Ohio

As you may have guessed by now, the answer is C, Salt. Like a lot of history's great movers and shakers, Columbus owes at least some of his fame to salt. Ferdinand and Isabella sent him off to who-knows-where 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 is often attributed to the trade in spice, the fact is most of that spice was 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. 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.

- 4) Which of the following was stolen from George Washington? (a) His teeth, (b) His ammunition, (c) His wig, (d) His salt

D, his salt. In 1777, British troops captured the lion's share of General Washington's all-important salt supply at Toms River, NJ, a strategically important salt works in colonial times. Salt was used to cure meat that was packed as rations for the Continental Army. For a time, this strategic capture by the British served to starve the Americans of food rations, as well as robbing them of a nutrient vital to their health. It left them ill-supplied for life on the military field, crippling their readiness and ability to fight.

- 5) What shape changed the history of salt? (a) The pyramid, (b) The diamond, (c) The cylinder, (d) The pentagon

The answer is C, the cylinder. Before 1911, salt was sold in big bags and the salt wouldn't pour when the weather was wet and/or the humidity high. Morton's new cylinder-shaped package was not only moisture-proof, it had a perfect shape for pouring and came with its own handy spout. Hence, the logo on the Morton salt container under the little girl with the yellow umbrella: "When it rains, it ("it" being the salt) pours."

- 6) Which of these can't you live without? (a) Money, (b) Love, (c) Chocolate, (d) Salt

All of the above. (*Just kidding*) The answer is Salt. Although it is nice to have all of the above, the only true necessity, physiologically speaking, is salt. The sodium salt provides regulates the heartbeat and the body's balance of fluids.

Again, from the historical context of salt's value and vital importance, we have to see that Jesus was *complimenting* His followers when He said to them, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" He was giving them high praise! 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 salt was something very special ... a treasured commodity, a precious substance, a necessary and vital and indispensable product.

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 it 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 infection. 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, those who are conscientious enough to take time out of their weeks to gather there around Him to hear and heed His words ... "*You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!*"

What does He mean? Besides the fact that He is paying His followers a huge 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 ... and light. Jesus means for His followers to permeate and penetrate and preserve and brighten up their community and their society in the same manner as salt and light. To perform its preserving function, the salt soaks into the meat. To perform its illuminating function, the light shines out into the darkness. The followers of Jesus can 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 charges 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?*" 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 pot roast or a darkened night, well, that's what happens when human 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 darkening world. It has in the past, it will in the present, and it will continue to do so in the future. May God increasingly enable and equip us to be His salt and light in our world.

I end with this thought. You know, 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. As we come here to the Lord's Table today, I would like to slightly mix metaphors 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" ... to be salt and light in this needy world.