

## Sermon – February 9, 2020

### **“Salt of the Earth, Light of the World” Matthew 5:13-20**

While preparing for my sermon today, an illustration contributed by Pastor Terry Dashner caught my undivided attention regarding salt. He says: “How valuable is salt? 40 million tons are required each year to fill our needs. Homer called it divine. Plato called it a “substance dear to the gods.” Shakespeare mentioned salt 17 times in his plays. Perhaps Leonardo da Vinci wanted to send a subtle message about purity lost when he painted “The last Supper.” In that painting, an overturned salt cellar is conspicuously placed before Judas. In ancient Greece a far-flung trade involving the exchange of salt for slaves gave rise to the expression, “...not worth his salt.” Thousands of Napoleon’s troops died during his retreat from Moscow because their wounds would not heal--their bodies lacked salt.”

The magic of salt! Imagine for a moment if the food we’re served with has not been garnished with salt? Don’t we all crave for that taste of a savoury dish enriched with a pinch of salt? Salt is like adding zest to life! Growing up in a village where salt-making is one of the primary trades; I have been exposed to how salt is made. Salt emerges from a complex process of evaporating seawater, dried, crystallized and then pounded and trampled for the texture and taste of choice – fine, coarse, sea salt, rock salt, baking salt, you name it. Salt is basic to human, animal and plant life. When you hear someone tells you that you are “the salt of the earth,” we know that person is giving the ultimate compliment: that you have something extraordinary or something commendable to offer.

One can write a whole history of the world just by tracing what has happened with salt. Wars have been won and lost on the basis of who has control of the salt. Salt was a lucrative commodity of raising money -- by controlling and taxing it. Guess why the Philippines was colonized by Spain for almost 500 years? It was because of the granaries of salt that provided wealth and power to the Spanish monarchy at that time. At different points in history, salt has been the currency of commerce. In fact, I learned from my readings that the word “salary” comes from the Latin *salarium*, a word for salt. In Roman times, salt was so precious that it was used, at least in part, to pay workers. Consider the importance of salt in our lives. Like seawater,

our bodies contain salt: a tear, a drop of blood, a bead of sweat. Without salt our hearts would not beat, blood would not flow, and muscles would not work properly.

Jesus' audience too knew that salt was necessary for life, a notion reinforced by the many references in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Biblical times, salt symbolizes a blessing and a curse, destruction and restoration, protection and harm. The prophet Elisha sprinkled salt into the spring at Jericho to purify the water (2 Kings 2:21.) To eat salt with another person was a sign of loyalty, of agreeing to a peace treaty, a breaking of bread, a sign of common ground (Numbers 18:19.) Priests scatter salt on sacrifices, and seasoned incense with salt. Parents rubbed salt all over their newborn baby's body as protection against all kinds of diseases (Ezekiel 16:4.) Ancient Roman baptisms included placing salt on the baby's tongue as the infant received water. Jewish babies are cleaned, salted, and wrapped. Sounds like spring roll to me! Salt is also an image for God's wisdom. But salt doesn't work on its own. For salt to work, it must be used - to preserve, to add flavour, to zests things up. It transforms the soil, the water, the function of the human body. To be a disciple, Jesus says, is to be like salt, mixed right into the middle of life, adding some zest and making a difference. He knew too well the forces of evil, hostility, and indifference in his ministry. He knew too well the powers of decay, destruction, and death which surrounded him. To be the salt of the earth implies that we are to bring "flavour" to our relationships with others. Salt makes come alive that would otherwise seem tasteless and bland - to preserve freshness and stimulate appetite. Being salt of the earth means getting into a whole work of transformation. To be salt of the earth is to be agents of healing and reconciliation, tending to the poor and needy, and making whole the broken by lifting up the world to the light and love of God. How are you being salt of the earth?

Another metaphor was used by Jesus for his followers. He calls them "light of the world". We often understand this to mean that we are not to hide our time, our talents and our treasure by placing them under a huge metaphorical bucket. There is one significant reason for light to shine. It is there to illumine darkness in life – external or internal. Light is essential for life and growth. It illumines things, and brings the hidden, the unknown into view. Light is measured by what it does, by how it changes its atmosphere. When the famous German writer Goethe was on his deathbed, his last request was, "More light." When the window shades were raised, he was not satisfied. He repeated, "More light!" Light symbolizes a life of quality and

service. When Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, he watched an old lamp lighter igniting lamps as he went down the street. Stevenson said to his nurse, "I am watching a man put holes in the darkness."

Likewise, Matthew accounts Jesus saying this: "A city on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do we light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, to give light to the whole house." Light is a metaphor for God's reign, that inner light glowing within our hearts that draws people to its warmth and radiance. Matthew spoke of Jesus by recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah (9:2a), that "the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light." Those who feel lost, or in despair, or confused, those who are in the midst of grief and those who have no idea which way to turn, we are called to offer light to them, to walk beside them in this journey called life. To "let our light shine before others," is to allow the good things that we do, radiate God's goodness and love in the world. We become light to the world when we engage others to heed Micah's challenge: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. We enable diversity and bring colour to life, nurturing a healthy, eco-friendly world. We become light in restoring or healing broken relationships – all of these and many more that are life-giving. And being light of the world, Eugene Peterson's translation is quite interesting. This is what he says: "We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill....Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep your house open, be generous with your lives". Be light to others." How are you being light to others? Are you going public with this?

One of the "salt & light" persons that come to mind is the woman featured in the new ten dollar bill. Her name is Viola Desmond. Viola Desmond was born in 1914 in a black community in Halifax, Nova Scotia. As a young woman, she dreamed of opening a beauty salon, but discovered that Nova Scotia beauty schools did not accept Black students. Instead of giving up her dream, Viola trained as a hairdresser and beautician in Montréal and the United States. She went on to become a successful entrepreneur in Nova Scotia, operating a beauty school as well as her own salon. Despite her many accomplishments, Desmond still had to contend with the racist practice of segregation.

Segregation is the enforced separation of racial groups. One day, Viola was removed from the Roseland Theatre for sitting in a whites-only section. She was charged with tax evasion for failing to pay the full tax on a main-floor movie ticket –that amounted to only

one cent. By refusing to change seats and by fighting her conviction in court, Viola directly challenged segregation in Canada and she was put to jail. After receiving support from family and friends, she decided to appeal her conviction, and it was eventually brought before the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia. Even though she ultimately lost her appeal, her stand against injustice galvanized Nova Scotia's Black community and helped inspire Canada's civil rights movement. She passed away in 1965.

It was only in 2010 that the justness of Desmond's cause was officially recognized, when the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia posthumously pardoned her, removing her conviction from the historical record. Desmond's story, long unknown to most Canadians, is now becoming more familiar. In 2018, she became the first Canadian woman featured on a regularly circulating Canadian \$10 bill. When you see her face on that bill, remember to take a seat for Viola. She was salt and light to those who are fighting to end racism and discrimination in all forms.

Salt and light – a new duo like peanut butter and jelly or sugar and spice. This is our new job description: “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.” Dynamic, not static, churning things up. We are called not just a salt shaker next to the chicken stew or the bean salad at supper; not just keeping the electric bill paid so the lights in the sanctuary stay on. We are called to move and shake the world and to illumine those places of greed, poverty, violence and destruction with God's justice, compassion and peace. We are called to flavour and illumine the world with God's hope, faith and love. “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world,” believe it and live it. Thanks be to God. Amen.