

This is TOO Salty... Isaiah 58:1-12 selected & Matthew 5:13-16

When Jude and I had just started dating in the spring of 1980 in Kent, Ohio, there was still a chill in the air and one day she offered to make us split pea soup to warm us up a bit. Jude had not made this particular soup very often, and as she cooked, she thought it tasted a bit bland, and so she added salt. She checked a little while later and thought, "hmm, still bland" and added more salt. This was repeated once or twice more. We then sat down to a lovely meal of fresh biscuits and soup. Jude, of course, was anxious that I see her culinary skills. And since we were still early in our dating, I, of course, wanted to be complimentary. So when I took the first bite, I said, "Mmmmm," even though I thought it was a bit salty. The second bite proved to be too much for me and I involuntarily puckered up and said, "I think this is too salty." Jude took a bite, and her eyes got big and she grabbed a drink of water, and in a slightly constrained voice said, "I think you're right!" With great laughter we buried that soup in her back yard, and a few years later the EPA declared it a clean-up site.

That salty soup came to mind when I read the words of Jesus in Matthew, "you are the salt of the earth." What does that mean? Salt in the time of Jesus was used as a seasoning, and as a preservative for food. It was also used as a disinfectant and as a sign of promise. Salt was so valuable it was used as currency. So why did Jesus use salt to talk about our role as his followers? As the Split Pea soup reminds us the phrase "if a little is good, a lot is better" does not apply to salt. In fact in the scriptures invading armies will salt the fields of their enemies

to make them unable to grow food for a long time and Jesus mentions using flavorless salt to build walkways. We do not eat salt by itself. Really it has little use on its own. Salt is meant to bring out flavor in or preserve other things. As a carpenter, Jesus could have said, “you are the hammer of the earth.” meaning we are to build things up with force, but he didn’t. Nor did Jesus say, “you are the rulers of the earth,” meaning we should impose the teachings of Jesus upon all the nations. No, Jesus said, you are the salt, the flavoring, the preserving agent, the disinfectant, the symbol of dedication of the earth.

Many people believe that their proper role is to impose the teachings of their faith upon everyone else. We could probably find groups in every faith that do this. Not all would be as violent as the so-called Islamic State, but make no mistake, there have been and still are followers of Jesus who want to be “rulers of the earth,” instead of “the salt of the earth.”

The second image Jesus uses for our role is “light of the world.” Again, just like salt, light is not really a thing used on its own. Scientists are still not sure if light is wave or particle. Light illumines other things, it brings them forward, it makes them clear. Anne Lamott images what it means to be the light of the world when she writes in *Traveling Mercies*, “Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.” Being the light of the world is to bring grace and clarity. The Great Sufi Poet, Hafiz, captured this when he wrote in the 14th century

"Let tenderness pour from your eyes, the way sun gazes warmly on earth."

In John 8 when the religious leaders bring a woman caught committing adultery to Jesus they say, "the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" Jesus bends down writing in the sand. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, and Jesus was left alone with the woman. Jesus straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.'* And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

This tastes like the salt of the earth, preserving dignity and grace... This looks like an illuminating light of forgiveness and repentance: changing ways... We are not God's hammers and chisels, we are not wrecking balls for Jesus. We are salt and light. Oh, that does not release us from our work as described in Isaiah, to "loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke, to share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our house; and when you see the naked, to cover them." We must do this work, but our posture, our stance, must always be one of salt and light. Acknowledging that those with whom we disagree are not an

enemy. They are not different from us but are God's children, perhaps, like us, occasionally needing some clarifying light like the woman caught in adultery. Jesus never fought fire with fire. He moved beyond an eye for an eye... to a morality of salt and light, as we hear from this portion just a little later in the sermon on the mount/plain in Matthew 5: *You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?*

We come now to this table, a reminder to us of Jesus' commitment to be salt and light. He was willing to share this holy meal with those who would betray and deny him just a few hours later. He was willing to go forth and though his sharp mind and eloquence probably could have gotten him released, he said nothing on his own behalf. He stayed fully committed to non-violence because he knew the light of God would shine most clearly if God made him able to overcome the

greatest darkness of all, the darkness of an unjust, violent, torturous death. The light of Easter enlightens us to be the salt and light of the earth and a city on a hill.

On that night....

Isaiah 58:1-12 selected

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Thus says the Lord, "the fast that I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Matthew 5:13-16

[Jesus said:] "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 underfoot. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives 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 your Father in heaven.