

Years ago, back in 1972 or 1973 when I was in High School, I came with my mother to Faith Lutheran Church in Okemos for a gathering of the Michigan District ALCW (the American Lutheran Church Women). I vividly remember that day because Evelyn Frost, a person some of you probably remember, was the speaker. Her remarks on that day made a huge impression on my formidable mind. The gospel passage on which she spoke was the gospel reading we have today. I remember being fascinated as she talked about salt, the many properties and varieties of salt, and the multiple ways in which salt is used. As I studied today's gospel reading that experience of forty-five years ago came to mind.

Salt and light. Today, Jesus tells us we are the salt and light of the world. Last week we heard Jesus launch his ministry by beginning his inaugural address, the message we now call the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard him begin with The Beatitudes, that wonderful vision that lifts up the most unlikely people – the poor in spirit, the meek and the merciful, those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Last week we heard Jesus call these most unlikely of people “blessed.” Today, Jesus continues his sermon by addressing the crowd as

“you,” and offering them words of both reassurance and challenge. The “you” he addresses is plural. It is to be heard by us not as privately pious Christians but as the Body of Christ active in the world God so deeply loves, even if that activity is at times risky business. As Jesus continues he uses the metaphors of salt and light. And, like that second generation of Christians to whom Matthew was writing, we listen with the crowd to hear that we, too, are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

One of the things I remember Evelyn Frost talking about was the existence of multiple types of salt. If we were to go out shopping for salt we would find pink, black, gray, flaky, crystals, rock, sand, iodized, and uniodized just to name a few. Some salts are better used when cooking, while others are best as a finishing touch. Some salts are not edible but are used for chemical purposes. **Salt** is something that is necessary for human life. And, remembering that the book of Matthew is written for early Jewish Christians, it is interesting to note that some early Christian communities placed salt on the tongue of the newly baptized. Given the wide variety of salt around the world, its culinary and chemical significance and its many uses, Jesus’ comparison of believers to salt is even more meaningful. As Christians, one might say we are chemically the same through the work of the Spirit, but called to different uses and work.

And, when we think about light, we must remember light is not just the opposite of dark. It is also the opposite of heavy. In today's Old Testament reading, Isaiah calls Israel to a fast that is about reducing a certain kind of heaviness – the heaviness others carry. The fast that God has chosen should lessen the burden and heaviness of those who are oppressed. The fast that God has chosen should lessen the heaviness and struggles of the poor, the widows, the orphans, the resident aliens among us and **all** those on the margins. Lighting the world as children of God should also involve *lightening* the weight of war, poverty, destruction, and division.

Today's gospel reading epitomizes Matthew's understanding that the Christian movement built upon and perfected the righteousness prescribed in the Jewish commandments and the call of prophets like Isaiah. When talking about Jesus' words to us today, Lutheran theologian and professor, Barbara Lundblad, connects his message to the words of the prophets before him when she writes:

For Jesus, salt and light came out of a long tradition of biblical teaching: salt and light were images for the law of God. Salt and light must take us back to the fullness of the law and the prophets, and the fullness of Jesus' radical teaching in this Sermon on the Mount. The prophets plead for fullness of life: freedom from oppression, bread for the hungry, homes for those who have none, clothing for the naked. Is this not what it means to be the salt of the earth, to keep this prophetic word alive in the midst of our world? If we lose this vision, if

we give in to other values, if we forget God's longing for justice, our salt has lost its taste. If you think Jesus' call is impossible, remember that the One who is our bread is with us and within us, empowering us to be salt and light in this world.

Yes, this is the righteousness prescribed in the Jewish commandments and the call of the prophets, and it is the righteousness called forth in the kingdom of heaven, the in-breaking reign of God. This is the righteousness Jesus proclaims as already here when transformation is taking place through him. The Christian community receives the call to be salt and light and this gospel message is about bringing transformation not only to our individual selves or the members of a specific church or community, but transformation to the entire world.

Now, it is important to look again at Jesus' words to us. He says, "You **are** the salt of the earth....you **are** the light of the world." As Lutheran pastor and theologian David Lose says:

Jesus isn't saying, "You *should* be the salt of the earth and light of the world." Or, "You *have* to be,..." let alone "You *better* be,...." Rather, he is saying, you **are**. As in *already* are. Even if you don't know it. Even if you once knew it and forgot. Even if you have a hard time believing it. Jesus is making to his disciples a promise about their very being, he is not commanding, let alone threatening them about what they should be doing. And that's worth tarrying over, as so many in our congregations and world experience God more like a divine law-maker and rule-enforcer than generous gift-giver.....In today's reading, Jesus is making **promises** and **giving out gifts**. You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world, and this is, like Jesus' words we heard last week, **sheer blessing**. And, it is about identity,

about our very being, which in turn leads to doing. It is all about living into the God-given identity we already have.

Listen again to Jesus' words to us today as I read them from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. Listen as Jesus speaks to you:

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

As I think back to that time in the early '70's when I came here to Faith Lutheran Church and heard Evelyn Frost speak, I realize she truly was salt-seasoning bringing out God-flavors to all who listened. She was God's light-bearer who brought transformation in my life. May we, like her, "open up to others and prompt others to open up with God."