

I still vividly remember the time fifty plus years ago when I first came to Faith Lutheran Church in Okemos. I was in High School, and I came with my mother to Faith Lutheran Church for a gathering of the Michigan District ALCW (the American Lutheran Church Women). I clearly remember that day because Evelyn Frost was the speaker. I am sure some of you who are long time members remember her. Evelyn's remarks on that day made a huge impression on my young, 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 roughly fifty years ago came to mind.

Salt and light. Today, Jesus tells us **we** are the salt of the earth, and **we** bring light to 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 fascinating things I remember Evelyn Frost so eloquently 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, rock, crystals, iodized, and un-iodized 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, like melting ice on winter roads. **Salt** is something that is necessary for human life. And, when we hear Matthew’s gospel today and remember that it was written for early Jewish Christians, it is thought-provoking to note that some early Christian communities placed **salt** on the tongue of the newly baptized. Given the wide varieties 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. However, we are called to different uses and work.

And, when we think about Jesus calling his followers **light**, we must remember light is not just the opposite of dark. The word "light" 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, the most vulnerable, and **all** those on the margins. Lighting the world as children of God should also involve **lightening** the weight of war, poverty, destruction, oppression, 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 faith 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 the 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 whose words brought transformation in my life. And as I

think about my past eight years with you, while preparing for retirement, **you** have been God's light-bearers and **you** have brought transformation to so many lives. I give thanks that you truly are a shining light in this community. As I prepare to leave, my prayer for you is that you will continue to keep open house; and continue to be generous with your lives. I pray you will continue to faithfully open up to others and, by doing this, prompt people to open up to God, the One who is so very generous to **all** and showers us with overwhelming love. I pray you will continue to **shine the light of God's overwhelming, unconditional love for all people!**