

“Stay Salty and Stay Lit”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 12./16/18

While the title can have a quite different meaning than I intended, I nevertheless chose it because it will most likely lodge itself in our memory banks this morning. In that regard, I simply couldn't resist: “Stay Salty and Stay Lit.” It was one of the many powerful messages Jesus gave during his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, which we just read. The double meaning of the phrase notwithstanding, I think it's still a clever title. For example, take the word “salty.” When we had this last snowfall, we, like many of you, were snowed-in. Even while the snow was still falling heavily, our nine-year-old daughter insisted she wanted to go outside and play in it. Ruth and I avoided the request for as long as we could. Finally my wife caved in, though. And as she and our daughter got ready to go outside, I told Ruth, “Hey, while you're out there, if you want to shovel a little bit of snow—that would be great.” She quickly looked at me with all seriousness and without missing a beat, “Oh, you can't shovel snow—now? I see.” Daniela was standing next to her and cut the tension in the air immediately with a single word, a smile, and a wink, “Salty!” And with that our growing “misunderstanding” dissipated on its own.

Jesus said plainly, “You are the salt of the earth.” Ruth and I were at a gathering about a week ago where our friend Pastor Reason Chandler from Jackson Street Methodist was preaching and he said, “You know a real chef never uses salt to cover the flavor. Instead, a chef knows how to use just the right amount of salt to bring out all of the flavors. It accentuates the food in such a way that all the flavors shine through.” Any of us working with salt know this to be true. Also, there's a tipping point; the moment where something becomes too salty. How many times has that happened to us? We are salting something to a perfect flavor and all of a sudden we ruin it? And don't forget salt has a long illustrious history as an important spice, so much so that even in Jesus' time, the Roman word for salt (which is the same in Spanish *sal*) is related to the word for salary (*salarium*). So, when Jesus says we are the salt of the earth, in essence, it could be understood that we are a vital component of the world-order itself. The kingdom that the Messiah brings, like the prophet Isaiah states, includes one in which its leader is known as the “Prince of Peace.” Remember Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount had just finished telling his audience, “Blessed are the Peace makers for they shall be called the children of God.” Undoubtedly within our saltiness is the act of “peacemaking.” Much like how my daughter used the very word “saltiness” to deescalate tension between my soulmate and myself, how much more should we use our words to deescalate the tensions between enemies?

In this season of Advent, the moment in which we specifically reflect on Jesus' humble birth, but God's act of mercy and love towards human kind, does Jesus not become a symbol of Peace. King Herod, during that time, sought to eradicate this would-be usurper of his worldly kingdom—not understanding that the kingdom which Jesus would establish is a kingdom in the heart and the actions of each us: A kingdom founded on hope and joy, as much as on peace.

I worked in the world of sales at various times throughout my working years. We had a saying, “Hope is not a strategy.” Training a newer sales person, we would wait to hear them make the mistake of saying something like, “I hope I get the sale.” Or “I hope I can convince them.” We would immediately correct them by telling them, “Hope is not a strategy.” And then redirect them to the sales process itself. However, as Christians, hope is a major part of our belief. It includes a deeper faith in the things perhaps not yet seen, a dream of what is to come, if you will, of what we can accomplish together—a hope for a better and more loving world. Hope may not be our “strategy” per se, but it is indeed the feeling that

wells up within us about better times to come. It serves as both our aspiration and our inspiration. The idea of being the salt of the earth is based on a hope that if we can somehow bring out the best in others, like salt brings out the flavors of the other spices... then the world will be a better place. That the Hebrew concept of Tikun Olam (the bringing back the shards of a broken vessel in order to make it whole again) is truly accomplished. To this end, we are hopeful. When I had just crossed the Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma, AL a couple months ago, and I asked one of the black pastors with me that night in the hotel room as we saw a news report together on “voter suppression” in a neighboring state, “Do you think this will ever end?” We had just re-lived Selma together. He had pointed to the spot where John Lewis had been beaten. We had just heard testimony of others who were terrorized by deputized white vigilantes breaking into their homes and burning crosses, firing guns at them. His response was simple, yet profound. He said plainly, “I hope so.” Hope is critical, my friends. Hope is at times ALL that we have. It is not a strategy, but it is our fuel. It is our gas in the tank. We can’t drive forward without it.

Jesus said, “You are the Light of the world.” Many like to say, “Jesus is the Light of the world.” I think that can be considered cheating at times. If we say “Jesus is the Light,” then it takes away our responsibility. So, when we conveniently choose not to be the light, not to be goodness, not to be the love in this world, not to be the joy that people see and hear, then we can simply chalk it up to us being “human.” “We’re selfish,” we might say. This shifts the responsibility from us, to God. “God is perfect. I’m not.” We might say. What kind of excuse is that? Think about it. When we put it all on Jesus, we conveniently leave ourselves out of the equation all together. Well thank God this is a humanistic church. Jesus loved human beings, and he taught us that God does too. Our Creator wants to work through us, use us... not shift it away from us. We become God’s hands, God’s feet, God’s eyes, God’s mouth, God’s heart. This way, when Jesus says, “You are the Light of the World,” we take it seriously!

Just before he says “You are the salt of the earth,” and “you are the light of the world,” Jesus says the world will persecute you. You will suffer. They will hurl insults at you—but do not hesitate to rejoice even in that. Even in your suffering, be glad, find joy. In one of David Edward’s first sermons as our new pastor here in 2003, he preached on how we are to show our joy to the world. He said, *“Joy is at the heart of Christian faith and life. Not a joy that ignores evil or avoids looking at the suffering of the world. But a joy that comes from a deeper place, where we know our relatedness to all creation, where we know that our lives are rooted in what is eternal... Without this joy in us, individually and together as Christ’s community, there is something essential missing. We may do great things. We may speak great truth. We may excel in spiritual practices. But if we are not touching the wellspring of joy that comes from God’s creating, sustaining, and saving love, then we will come across only as morose moralists.”* Joy is a major identifier of our Christian walk. We are the “crazy people” that smile in the face of adversity, love our enemies, turn the other cheek. We are filled with hope even when there seems to be nothing but gloom in the future. We see the light. Why? Because, as Jesus said, we are the light.

Like the salt that brings out the best in others, we are the light that shines hope and joy everywhere we go. Some of you will say, “well that seems pretentious.” I don’t deny the corniness of being the relentless smile in a landscape of dreary frowns. I understand that such a sight in and of itself seems like fakery. However, I must believe that within us, is a genuine joy, and genuine hope. And if we were to let that shine despite the darkness that seems to envelope us at times, then we will inspire hope in others. And sometimes hope is all we need—and joy is a sign of hope. I must believe that it can make a difference. I believe that you and I can make a difference. I believe Jesus when he calls us both salty and lit. Let us bring out the best in others, and let us shine a light of hope and joy in the process. Amen.