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Salt and Light  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
February 9, 2020  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 58:1-9a and Matthew 5:13-20

You know - I really feel blessed today. Not only because I am finally here, and fully engaged in worship this morning at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. I mean, isn't that blessing enough for anyone? But more than that, This is my first opportunity to preach here and I know that some of you have high expectations. And in in the midst of those expectations the authors of the lectionary have given us some well-known and well-loved texts. "You are the salt of the earth". "You are the light of the world!" Definite winner lines!

"You are the salt of the earth" is such a classic, I've seen it as a fridge magnet. Which is a bit ironic of course because ... well, let me tell you a story. Not so many years ago there was a project going on in Germany where people were re-writing the Bible in contemporary language. It was one of those open web projects where people - ordinary people - submitted suggested "modern" wordings for pieces of scripture. And apparently, one of the suggested "modern" translations for "You are the salt of the earth" was in fact "You are the refrigerator". Clearly, the phrase has inspired some deep thinking!

And how about the reading from Isaiah. It's not as well-known, but still, it is familiar to our hearts. Isaiah is speaking to a community where ritual actions are seen as more important than good works. And Isaiah is pushing back at that community. To quote, "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." Isaiah's community - like many other communities in his day - practiced "fasting" as a spiritual discipline. Now fasting is a wonderful spiritual practice that can lead to meaningful spiritual encounters. And fasting was also a requirement under Hebrew law for a number of situations. But Isaiah speaks to people who are observing the practice of fasting while at the same time completely missing the potential for any spiritual revival. The spiritual

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discipline of fasting had - for some people at least - turned into a simple physical act. An act that can be learned and followed. But an act that had been drained of all of its meaning. In Isaiah's community, fasting had become an empty ritual.

I once participated in a workshop on spiritual care in crisis situations. The workshop focused on how to provide spiritual care to people caught up in large-scale disasters, and also on how to provide spiritual care to the professionals who are responding to those crises. Some of the people who spoke at the workshop had provided care during the event in August of 2005 when an Air France plane crashed at the Toronto airport. As you may recall, the aircraft was consumed by flames, but only after the 309 people had evacuated - in under 1 minute I might add. So the "crisis" turned out to be not so much of a crisis. Nobody died. But it was certainly traumatic for passengers, and for some of the emergency responders too.

But as different people at the workshop spoke about their own response during the Air France crisis, it became clear to me that there were two completely different approaches to providing care that were being presented. Some of the spiritual care workers treated people according to their needs. And some spiritual care workers treated people according to their rituals.

A Jewish rabbi, for example, decided that the best spiritual response was to speak only to the Jewish passengers. He decided that people would feel most comforted when speaking to someone from "their own" community. Someone who understood the need to follow Jewish rituals. He decided that the ritualistic aspects of spiritual care were the most important.

Other spiritual care providers took the approach of just providing care where care was most apparently needed, and that normal day to day rituals were not really that relevant. After getting off the airplane, the real crisis for most of the passengers that day was a communications crisis. Even though there were no fatalities, at some point during the day the media released a story stating that there had been, so passengers were understandably anxious to communicate with their families. And of course, many people were deeply shaken due to what could only be considered a get close brush with death.

As a participant in the workshop, it was fascinating to watch our text from Isaiah

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played out in front of my own eyes. This tension between people who felt that supporting rituals was a key element in providing comfort, and those who believed that all human being share the same pain in times of crisis. My own sense was that the focus on “rituals” was actually a barrier to providing proper care that day. The rituals were at odds with reality, and that made the rituals empty. Perhaps some would disagree with me. Or perhaps we need to create new rituals around communications. But I hope we can all agree that rituals can become empty, rituals can become drained of their meaning.

Do you remember the 1972 movie, “The Godfather”? If you have not seen it, the movie is about the relationships between and within powerful crime families in the United States from roughly 1945 to 1955. The movie focuses on the activities of the Corleone family. The movie depicts the various tensions between family ties, integrity, good business practices and honour.

For me, the most dramatic scene of the movie was the baptism. Because the baptism scene includes 6 overlaid stories. The main story is the baptism of Michael's son in proper Roman Catholic fashion. But while the baptism is happening, the camera keeps cutting to other scenes, where we see rival family leaders being killed by Michael's people, under Michael's orders. The camera cuts to different scenes, but the audio we hear is always from the baptism.

And the movie production leaves no doubt as to the intended interpretation. For example the priest performing the baptism asks Michael, “Do you renounce satan, and all his works?” And Michael replies, “I do renounce them”, while the camera shows us one of Michael's men making a kill. It's a very dramatic piece that really stands out. The ritual of baptism happened at the same time as the murders. The symbolism was obvious. The baptism itself had been drained of all its meaning.

It's easy to let our own rituals be drained of all meaning. It's easy to take a regular activity - like fasting, or going to church, or communion - and to keep pumping away at the physical activity itself while losing sight of the spiritual meaning. And more importantly, to lose the essential purpose of the activity, which is not about the physical activity, but rather, is about spiritual transformation.

Perhaps that's why Matthew's Jesus said, “we are the salt of the world”, and

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warned us that salt can lose its saltiness, and that salt without saltiness is worthless. Salt can lose its saltiness, just as rituals can sometimes be drained of their meaning. Rituals that used to provide spiritual nurture can become ineffective. Salt can lose its saltiness.

But I disagree with Matthew on one important point. I believe that if we lose our saltiness, it can be restored. And I say that because I believe in healing. Besides - what is salt anyway? There are at least 4 uses for salt - and perhaps you can think of others:

- Salt preserves. Salt keeps fish and meat edible for a long time. I have no doubt that was the understanding behind the modern translation of “you are the salt of the earth” as “you are the refrigerator”.
- Salt enhances. Salt is used to enhance flavour, or better yet, salt brings out the flavour that was always there.
- Salt heals. Salt is an antiseptic that can remove infection.
- Salt transforms. Salt is a catalyst that allows chemical transformation to occur, and can be used to melt ice for example.

So, why are we talking about this today? As I mentioned, it’s the suggested lectionary text for the day, but I didn’t need to pick it. This is the part in the sermon where I usually say, if you’ve been sleeping up to now, it’s time to wake up. Because we are about to turn the corner and connect the past with our present. When Matthew said, “YOU are the salt of the earth”, I imagine he was speaking to individual people. But today I say, “WE are the salt of the earth”. We as a congregation. We meaning the new relationship that we are now sharing with each other.

And I need to ask, just how “salty” are we here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church? Are there places in our own lives where perhaps we have lost some of our own saltiness? Are there places in our life as a congregation where we need to reimagine ourselves? Today is a new day. We get to decide what our new relationship will look like. It’s our choice. And as Red Green says, “We are all in this together”.

Let’s just review that list again. What is it that salt does?

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Salt:

- preserves
- enhances
- heals
- transforms

I think the same list applies here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. Do we want to be a force in our own community for preserving, enhancing, healing, and transforming life? How salty do we want to be? I hope the answer is, very! I hope that salt isn't only used here on the potatoes. WE are the salt of the earth. We are here to preserve, enhance, heal, and transform ourselves, each other, and the world. Thanks be to God.

Just before I close, I want to mention that today - as always - we will end our service singing "Go Now in Peace". And when we come to that, I invite us to actually read the words on the screen or in the bulletin, because I have changed just a couple of words. Since I was told that this congregation wants to live into a progressive vision of Christianity, I decided to change the image of God that is reflected in that song.

Traditionally, God was seen as an old man with a beard, living in the sky. That gave rise to the line in the song, "God will be there, watching from above". And if that is your vision of God, you are welcome to embrace it. But in the days to come, I will be projecting and living an image of God not as someone separate out there, but rather as a force within each of us. So today we will be invited to sing, "God will be there, present in our love". Because God is present when we ourselves live love.

WE are the salt of the earth. We are here to preserve, enhance, heal, and transform ourselves, each other, and the world. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*