

The Salt of the Earth

Texts: Isaiah 58: 1-12; Matthew 5: 13-20

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It's reported that when St. Augustine's mother, St. Monica, went to Rome, she was greatly disturbed. The church there fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, and she was used to fasting on Tuesdays and Thursdays in her native north Africa.

She wrote to her son for advice on what to do, and he quoted her a saying of St. Ambrose of Milan: when in Rome, do as the Romans do. True story! That's where it comes from.

Monica's question was about doing the right thing. Monica wanted to know how she should behave to be a good Christian. Should she follow the practices as she was taught growing up, or should she adapt to the local culture? Was it Christian enough, or was it a distortion of what was right?

The answer was that there are many ways to be a Christian and to do Christian things, and just because it's different doesn't mean it's wrong. It's okay to adapt your practices to the way things are in the church where you are worshipping, at least within bounds.

Well, we don't do a lot of fasting in our church, so how is this relevant? Are we to take up fasting now? On Wednesdays and Fridays? Or Tuesdays and Thursdays?

Protestants don't do a lot of fasting, not because it's not Biblical, because it really is, but because it is so prone to abuse. You might think that you are doing what's required of you, doing what's right, just by depriving yourself of a little bit of food now and then.

It's a good practice for self-discipline, but the self-discipline is not an end in itself. The goal is not to be self-disciplined, but to do what's right, even when it's hard.

Isaiah goes right to the heart of the matter, which is that it's a matter of the heart. The people of his time were going through all the motions of being religious: they were bowing their heads, maybe even putting on sackcloth and ashes, and trying to be humble on their fast days.

That's more than most of us do, but God's word through Isaiah is that it's missing the point. The point is not to make yourself miserable, but to change the world. The point is not to deprive yourself of a little food, but to offer food to others who really need it.

Your heart has to be changed from wanting to satisfy your every desire to wanting to see a basic fairness in society; your heart has to fast from wanting everything all the time, so that you can open your grasping hands to share with the poor. This is God's message through Isaiah.

If you answer the cry of the poor for help in their time of need, then the Lord will answer your cry for help in your time of need. Then the Lord will go before you and behind you, and will say, "Here I am" when you call on him.

In ancient Israel, many people fasted, but in Isaiah's time, at least, no one understood why they were doing it anymore. It wasn't supposed to be a public demonstration of piety; instead, it was

supposed to be a time of offering to others what you were denying yourself, a time to right injustices.

Underlying it all was the basic assumption that God had provided enough for everyone, and that if some were going without, it was because an injustice had occurred.

Why were some people hungry? Because others had taken too much of the food.

Why were some people so poor? Because others had claimed more than their fair share of the resources God had put on the earth for everyone.

Why did some people have storehouses with more gold than they could ever use in three lifetimes, while others didn't have a shekel for their daily bread? Because through cleverness or coercion, they were taking advantage of the poor.

A fast was supposed to be a time to clear your head of the constant wanting of *more, more, more* so that the injustices of the world could be righted.

It was supposed to be a time when you put yourself in the place of those who daily went without food because they couldn't afford it, a time when you walked a mile, or a day, in their shoes so that you could have empathy with them, and compassion on them. A fast was a time when those whose bellies were full could choose to experience what it was to wake in hunger and go to bed in hunger, and thus share in the daily and unchosen reality of the poor.

Do that, says God in Isaiah, and your light will shine like the light of the dawn. Do that and "your light will rise in the darkness, and even your gloomiest time will be like the noonday."

Israel was supposed to live like this so that they could be a beacon of hope to the world, so that the other nations would see how Israel's God, the only and true God of all the earth, had created this wonderful society, and would give up their false gods and false ways of life, and would follow Israel's God.

Israel was to be like a shining city on a hill, a beacon for all around, a guiding light to show the way.

It mostly didn't work out that way, because it's too easy to go through the outward motions without going through the inward change that makes all the difference.

This is why Jesus is telling his disciples, the new Israel, that they are to be the light of the world, the city built on the hill, that gives light to everyone and which shows the way to God.

The disciples are to fulfill the mission of Israel, and to bring everyone to God: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Switching up the metaphor, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be the salt of the earth. In the ancient world, before refrigeration, salt was used to preserve food, especially meat. It kept the meat from going bad.

The disciples are to keep the world from going bad, to act justly in a world with much injustice. Without them as a constant preservative, things will go bad very quickly.

The other thing that salt did was to add flavor to food. We all know how true this is – our high blood pressure testifies to the fact that we have too much salt in our diet. All our preserved foods are laced with salt because salt brings out the flavor like nothing else.

[Show soup can] This soup can alone has 83% of the daily value of sodium in it! But it does taste good!

By calling the disciples the salt of the earth, Jesus is saying that they are not just to preserve what good is in the world, but they are to make life in the world so much better for others that they will be as indispensable to a full and rich life as salt is to a delicious meal.

As Jesus himself put it, when giving one of the reasons that he had come into the world, “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”

In imitation of Jesus, that’s what our aim is as disciples: to help others to live life to the fullest, to fulfill their purpose in God’s kingdom plan, to know what it is to live abundantly through Christ.

That’s why we have our church: so that we can become the type of people whose lives are a light to others, who preserve what is good in the world, and who spice things up so that others’ lives are better – as well as our own, for as Isaiah said, when you do these things, your Redeemer will go before you and the glory of the Lord will follow after you.

If we forget about that, if we cease to work for justice, if we just go through the motions, then we will lose our saltiness – we won’t be any use at all.

In the ancient world, they didn’t have pure salt as we do. Rather their salt was often mixed in with other minerals. When they stored it, there was a tendency for dampness to get in if you weren’t careful.

And salt dissolves in water, so when the dampness came, the salt started to dissolve and run off, bit by bit, perhaps without anyone noticing too much. When it came time to use the salt, all that was left were the other minerals. The “salt” wasn’t salty anymore! It was no good, and just had to be thrown out.

When we forget our bigger purpose in seeking justice, we can become as useless to God for bringing about God’s kingdom as the lump of minerals that is left after all the valuable salt has disappeared.

Fortunately, we have a great opportunity as we go through our visioning process, while we are looking for a new permanent minister, to be on the lookout for opportunities to serve, opportunities to be the salt of the earth, to change the world for the better, to flavor it with love and service, to make a difference in our community and the world.

We want to make sure that we really are the salt of our community, people whose acts of kindness and compassion show what a community based in the love of God can be, and what it can do.

In a couple of weeks, Lent will be upon us, starting on Wednesday, the 26th of February. Let us use that time to seek the true fast of the heart, the fast that undoes injustice and feeds the hungry, the fast that opens our grasping hands and offers what we have to others.

Let us seek to be the light of the world, a beacon of acceptance in a world that can often be cruel and indifferent, or worse, to people who are just trying to be themselves.

And let us be the salt of the earth, in a good way, not by acting in a way that raises everyone's blood pressure, as some parts of Christ's church are doing, but by working to keep what is good from going bad in our society, and by making sure that everyone's life is made better by our presence in it.

Amen