

Rev. Dr. Mark Allen Doty, Senior Pastor
Hammond Street Congregational Church, UCC
Bangor, Maine
February 9, 2020

RESTORING BEAUTY

Matthew 5:13-20

Our scripture lesson for the morning from Matthew begins by speaking about salt. We know that in the ancient world, salt was one of the most highly prized minerals. In some societies it was used as money. The English word "salary" is derived from the Latin word Salarium, which refers to the payments of salt made to a Roman soldier. Thousands of years ago, salt was used not only as a preservative and to strengthen flavor, it was used to seal covenants, to sprinkle on sacrifices, and was employed as a rub for newborn babies. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, salt was an important trading commodity.

When I was born, my father was the pastor of a Congregational Church in Salem, Massachusetts. The church parsonage where we lived was the former home of a Salem sea captain, who bought the house with a boat load of salt. Oh, the irony of being born into a house like that and never salting my food!

Jesus knew how important salt was to folks in the ancient near east. And so as he is speaking to the people in the Sermon On The Mount, Jesus says this: "You are the salt of the earth." Now in Jesus' day--and in our time as well--that expression conveys something good and even honorable. If we say that someone is "The salt of the earth," that means that person is modest and humble and without pretense.

But Jesus goes on to pose a problem: "But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" If the salt is no longer salty, says Jesus, then it has no value and needs to be thrown out. Jesus is using this analogy to talk about people and communities of faith. We are called to bring zest, to bring life to the world. We can't do it if we have lost our spiritual essence, our distinctive flavor.

I have written and spoken before about how many visitors to Hammond Street Church feel that something unique is going on here. They can feel a quality of spirituality, of closeness, of caring. That is who we are. That is our essence. That is the measure of our saltiness, if you will. One commentator says that "Any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it so that its distinctive calling is forgotten has rendered itself useless" (Douglas R.A. Hare, Matthew, and Westminster Bible Companion). A congregation without an identity is as useless as salt that has lost its taste.

One of the criticisms of megachurches is that they appear to try to please everyone and offend no one; they really work at being all things to all people. Because there can be a kind of one-size-fits-all mentality with big churches, it may be hard to find where the world stops and faith begins.

In an article about how it is for people who attend the largest churches in America, a writer named Bill McKibben spoke of it this way:

A New York Times reporter visiting one booming megachurch outside Phoenix recently found the typical scene: a drive-through latte stand, Krispe Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons about "How to discipline your children, How to reach your professional goals, How to invest your money, How to reduce your debt." On Sunday, children played with church-distributed Xboxes, and many congregants had signed up for a twice weekly aerobics class called firm believers.

Later on in the piece, McKibben says these elements are all well and good, but he asks: Is this what a church is supposed to be? (Bill McKibben, Harper's, August 2005). Jesus raised a similar question: "But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"

In our passage for the morning, Jesus also speaks about light. Christians individually and collectively should be noticed like candles in the darkness. One of the marks of being who we are, as followers of Christ, is that we should not apologize for it. We don't want to give anyone the impression that we are members of a secret society. Jesus' lines from the Sermon On The Mount are translated this way in The Message: "We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand--shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives" (Eugene Petersen, The Message). So Jesus is calling on us to be both salty and light-filled--equally tall challenges in a world where many think Christians should blend in, not stand up for justice and not welcome just anyone.

When Benjamin Franklin wished to interest the people of Philadelphia in street lighting, he didn't try to persuade them by just talking about it. He hung a beautiful lantern on a long bracket in front of his home. He kept the glass highly polished. Every evening at the approach of dusk, Franklin carefully lit the wick. People saw the light from a distance, and when they walked in its light, found that it helped them to avoid sharp stones on the pavement. Others placed light at their homes, and soon Philadelphia recognized the need for street lighting.

Brennan Manning is an author and a lay priest who speaks about the tie between light and compassion. Mr. Manning raises the question,

What is indiscriminate compassion? Can you imagine a lamp that withholds its rays from a wicked person who seeks to walk in its light? It could do that only by ceasing to be a lamp....that is the first quality of compassion—its indiscriminate character....what makes the kingdom come is heartfelt compassion: a way of tenderness that knows no frontiers, no labels, no compartmentalizing, and no sectarian divisions."

The picture of "The Praying Hands" in our bulletin this morning tells a story about "Indiscriminate Compassion," about inner light and even salt....

Back in the fifteenth century, in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family with eighteen children.

In order to keep food on the table for this big family, the father and head of the household, a goldsmith by profession, worked almost eighteen hours a day at his trade and any other paying chore he could find in the neighborhood.

Despite their seemingly hopeless condition, two of Albrecht Durer the elder's children had a dream. They both wanted to pursue their talent for art, but

they knew full well that their father would never be financially able to send either of them to Nuremberg to study at the Academy.

After many long discussions at night in their crowded bed, Albrecht the younger and Albert finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby salt mines and, with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the Academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, in four years, he would support the other brother at the Academy, either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by laboring in the salt mines.

They tossed a coin on a Sunday morning after church. Albrecht [The Younger] won the toss and went off to Nuremberg.

Albert went down into the dangerous mines and, for the next four years, financed his brother, whose work at the Academy was almost an immediate sensation. Albrecht's etchings, his woodcuts, and his oils were far better than those of most of his professors, and by the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn considerable fees for his commissioned works.

When the young artist returned to his village, the Durer family held a festive dinner on their lawn to celebrate Albrecht's triumphant homecoming. After a long and memorable meal, punctuated with music and laughter, Albrecht rose from his honored position at the head of the table to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled him to fulfill his ambition. His closing words were, "And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you."

Finally, Albert rose and wiped the tears that were streaming down his cheeks. He glanced down the long table at the faces he loved, and then, holding his hands close to his right cheek, he said softly, "No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look ... Look what four years in the [salt] mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines on parchment or canvas with a pen or a brush. No, brother ... For me it is too late."

One day, to pay homage to Albert for all that he had sacrificed, Albrecht Durer painstakingly drew his brother's abused hands with palms together and thin fingers stretched skyward. He called his powerful drawing simply "Hands," but the entire world almost immediately opened their hearts to his great masterpiece and renamed his tribute of love "The Praying Hands." (Source Unknown).

"Let your light so shine before others," said Jesus, "So they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven."

Copyright 2020 by The Rev. Dr. Mark Allen Doty

