

SALT
Matthew 5:13–20

Okay – a show of hands. How many of you have seen one of these TV shows?
Sesame Street. Masterpiece Theater. Antique Roadshow. Great British Baking Show.
Downton Abbey.

What do they have in common? They're all on PBS, the publically funded television network.

In May of 1969, PBS – the Corporation for Public Broadcasting – was in danger of losing its funding. There was a hearing held by the Senate, and a quiet man went to testify to the benefits of educational TV. His name – Fred Rogers.

In his six-minute presentation, Mr. Rogers explained to the chairman, Senator Pastore, that he was “trying to understand the inner needs of children.” I try each day to “help (each child) realize that (they are) unique. I end this program by saying ‘You’ve made this day a special day, by just your being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are.’”

He went on to describe how public television can do a great service for mental health. And that he, in his work with children on public television, has tried to present a meaningful expression of care.

The response of Mr. Pastore was to say, “I think it’s wonderful. Looks like you’ve just earned the 20 million dollars.”

Many of us have seen one or both of the recent movies about Mr. Rogers, who was, incidentally, a Presbyterian Church, U.S. A. minister. The first movie came out in 2018, a documentary, “Won’t You be My Neighbor?”

What one takes away from watching this movie about Mr. Rogers, besides a good cry, is an appreciation for the depths of character and kindness and decency in this man. And after watching, I feel so inspired to behave as he does.

This man...his ministry...it’s SALT.

Today’s text are the words from Jesus in the transitional section known as the Sermon on the Mount. (And I just want to say here, that I am going to see this location – this hillside, when I travel to Israel in early March. Which I am very, very, excited to do.)

On this hillside, Jesus has been preaching unexpected words to the crowd that has gathered there. There are words of compassion, words of challenge. You’ve heard them before: *Blessed are the peacemakers, Blessed are the meek...*

In this part of text, he names the people before him and calls them who they are. It's a corporate 'You.' The 'you' in Greek is plural:

You are salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

We don't have to wonder about how Jesus meant this metaphor. We know that salt was used at the time as medicine, as a preservative. But here, we know that Jesus is talking about FLAVOR. (This must have been pretty important. It made an impression – this text shows up in the other similar gospels, in Mark and in Luke.)

You are the salt of the earth.

What does a little bit of salt do to the whole?

We had a demonstration of this in our children's message a short while ago. And, you will have an opportunity to do this during fellowship hour. I'm setting out two baskets for you – unsalted/salted crackers. Be empiricists. Be scientists. Test this for yourselves!

A little bit of salt flavors the whole. Jesus says: don't lose your saltiness! Salt without flavor is worthless. But you, you, YOU can make a difference and change everything for the better.

The other metaphor in the text is LIGHT – being a lamp that is not hidden under a bushel, but put up high on a lampstand. You are LIGHT – and Ken so ably delivered a message about this on a previous Sunday.

Just as an aside here, I thought of titling the sermon *Getting Salty, Being Lit*, but I knew that these phrases now mean something different in modern vernacular. Something quite different from what I'm trying to get across.

But...getting salty...being Salt...shining Light...is something that we have been both named and charged with by Jesus.

How are we doing, church? Are we hiding under a bushel? Are we contributing the needed seasoning to the whole?

In honor of tonight's Academy Awards – the Oscars – I decided I wanted to share what the Presbyterian Church, USA (our denomination) is doing to share its saltiness and light in the realm of motion pictures. Yes. Presbyterians make movies.

Susan Krehbiel and I went to a screening of one of our most recent productions late last year. It's called *Flint: The Poisoning of an American City*. It was shown at the Charles Theater in Baltimore, which was partly due to honor and invite the then-living Honorable Elijah Cummings. Elijah Cummings chaired the congressional hearings that investigated the events in Flint.

The movie, *Flint*, is a feature-length documentary that tells first the story of the success and then decline of Flint, Michigan, once a booming center for the production of GM automobiles. As money and resources left the city and its fortunes declined, city managers changed the source of the water supply in order to save money. It began drawing its drinking water from the Flint River.

Throughout the documentary, we see how this environmental disaster occurred. Drinking water was, in effect, poisoned, affecting over 100,000 people in 2014. And even now, even today, a solution has not been found.

The Presbyterian Church, through the leadership of one of its agencies, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), went in to the city to ask residents to tell their stories, voices that have been lost or neglected during this crisis. We see and hear from those who are financially struggling, who don't have enough money to leave and go to a safer community, from those whose health is severely compromised. Most tragically, we see the effects of lead poisoning on the most vulnerable – the children of Flint – the majority of whom are poor and African American.

PDA is sharing this film through area gatherings, and it's just become available on streaming services. You can get it on Amazon prime, for example. It provides not only LIGHT – it illuminates what devastating injustice has occurred for these residents – but it's also SALT, offering opportunities for people to ask questions about their own cities: to discuss how we view and value water; to ask questions of our leadership; to ask ourselves, "Whose lives matter?"

PDA released this movie for this purpose: so communities will discuss, will learn, will be motivated to address social injustices, and to discern and discover how God commands us to dive into what's difficult and to offer hope.

Yes, we're getting salty: providing a little seasoning...to make the whole better.

This isn't the only resource of its kind. There are other films, some of which we've shown here and discussed at CPC. One of them, *Trigger*, examines the effects of gun violence. Another is *Locked in a Box*, which follows the stories of individuals held in the U.S. immigration detention system.

One that we haven't shown, but is available is *A Tradition of Welcome*, about our denomination's commitment to ministry with refugees and asylum seekers within the US and around the world.

I am particularly proud of our Presbyterian witness in the midst of these difficult and challenging issues. Where our society is functioning right now in a deeply divisive and polarizing way, these resources invite people into conversation. They provide salt and light so that we can see and taste...and explore together...grow together, with insight and compassion in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

We are, yes, living in tumultuous times. But Jesus himself said to us:

You are salt, you are light.

I am challenging myself to look for the salt. Where am I tasting it? What small things are bringing the flavor to the whole? In fact, I am considering making that my Lenten discipline when we begin that time of the church year later on this month.

One of the places I saw it was in the Washington Post editorial on Friday, by Marie Yovanovitch, (February 7, 2020 "[We Will Persist and Prevail](#)") who was recently the U.S. ambassador to the Ukraine. In it, she declares what an honor it was for her to represent the United States abroad, because, she writes, "like many immigrants, I have a keen understanding of what our country represents. "A country with resilient institutions...a society in which freedom is cherished and dissent protected."

She writes about her public testimony. "I did --- we did --- what our conscience called us to do. We did what the gift of U.S. citizenship requires us to do."

In the middle of her piece, she writes these important words:

"Every citizen doesn't need to do everything, but each one of us can do one thing."

She's reminding us to be salt in the midst of turbulent and challenging times.

She makes her critique. And she offers optimism. And courage. And encouragement.
Salt.

Church: we are salt. We are light.

And I could make a list of the ways this congregation is seeking to be faithful to that identity. Through voices calling us for Climate Change Action. Teaching us about Creation Care. Demanding that we see inequalities in our midst and in our larger community.

I see it in our senior high youth who have signed up for an inspiring week-long summer mission/learning ministry in Philadelphia, where they'll be exploring the themes of poverty, racial inequality, and mass incarceration. And, here's a shout-out to the Envision Fund, asking for creative – and even radical – ideas and then providing funding for salty and enlightening ventures.

The people on the hillside gathered around Jesus probably had never thought that they were offering much. They were an oppressed people. Occupied by a foreign power. They were living with immense problems and challenges and life was very, very hard. But Jesus told them: *You. You are the salt. You. You are the light.*

I haven't seen it yet, but I'm planning to watch "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." It's the second of the Mr. Rogers movies, based on an article by Tom Junod written in the Esquire magazine. Tom Hanks is up for best actor in it at the Oscars tonight.

When Junod published his article, the subheading read:

Fred Rogers has been doing the same small good thing for a very long time.

[\(Esquire Magazine, 1998, "Can You Say...Hero?"\)](#)

There are so many stories about how this man exemplified kindness and grace in very small ways. In person, one on one. And on a larger screen for a precious audience of children, who felt as if, for him, they were the most important person in the world.

Right now, one of the challenges of our world is power: who has it? How we do use it? How do we misuse it? What does it truly mean to be great? What does it truly mean to be strong?

One of the many, many inspiring things that Mr. Rogers said was:

"When I was boy I used to think that being strong meant having big muscles, great physical power, but the longer I live, the more I realize that real strength has much more to do with what is not seen. Real strength has to do with helping others."

Thanks for being salty, Mr. Rogers.

God willing...let us be salty too.