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“Access: Salt, Light and City”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Disability/Inclusion Sunday
June 24, 2012

Isaiah 35:1–10; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:13–16

In a few weeks, fifteen of our youth and their two chaperones, bless their hearts,
will be leaving for the Massanetta Middle School Conference in Harrisonburg, VA.
The theme of this year's conference for the sixth, seventh and eighth graders
is *Vivid and Visible*,
based upon the reading from the Beatitudes concerning Jesus' "you are"
statements: *You are the salt of the earth.*

You are the light of the world.

(You are) a city on a hill.

In John's Gospel, Jesus makes similar statements concerning his own identity:

I am the light of the world.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the way, the truth and the life.

I am the bread of life.

But in Matthew's Gospel, which predates John's Gospel,

Jesus points the finger first at his disciples and says, **YOU** are – salt, light, and city!

I will have the privilege of leading a workshop for the Massanetta Conference,

so I have been playing with these texts, literally, playing, for about the past month,

trying to decide what Jesus might be saying to his disciples,

and by extension, to the church, to me,

and to our youth which might be helpful and healthful for our life together.

Salt! The Greek word for "salt" is "alas" (ἀλας).

If salt is useless, Jesus says it is "moraino" (μωραίνω), which means
tainted, tasteless, insipid, or foolish,
good for nothing, except perhaps for traction underfoot,
should roads, cobblestones, or steps become slick or impassable, perhaps.

In speaking with several people around me about the uses of salt,
my husband recalled the days of his youth
when he was required to attend football practice daily in the heat of August,
fully outfitted, in the middle of the day, in Lumberton, in eastern North Carolina,
where sitting out or stopping for a water break was not an option
unless you wanted to be called a sissy or worse.

He said if players, who were just boys, got too dehydrated,
they would faint during practice,
or even worse, succumb to heat strokes on the field... not a good thing;
not a healthy thing.

The antidote in those days, he said, was for the coaches to give them salt tablets
before practice or when the players
would complain, or get light-headed or weak, or feel dehydrated,
to help them retain their fluids.

I don't think sports medicine encourages the use of salt tablets anymore by athletes,
but I do think they give them water and Gatorade regularly
to keep their electrolytes in balance during periods of extreme heat or exertion.

I asked MargEva Cole, a doctor in our congregation, how she reads some of these
passages about salt in scripture, specifically the instance in Mark 9 where Jesus
advises his disciples that "salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness,
how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves," Jesus says,
"and be at peace with each other." (Matthew 9:50)

The ever-wise MargEva says that, as a physician,
the mention of "salt" makes her think of IV saline solutions
that routinely are given to achieve *balance* in a person's system –
to keep a person's blood from "diluting out."

And that makes good sense to me because even salt that is thrown out
to be trampled or walked upon is salt used to keep feet from slipping
in order to help people maintain balance on a slippery or uneven surface.

And in ancient Judaism, salt was a symbol of covenant
and the balance implied in declarations like,

“I will be their God and they will be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33)

So, I like to think Jesus, perhaps, is pointing his finger at us, too, commanding us,
his twenty-first century disciples, to be like an IV saline solution,
agents of balance, for the health of the church and the health of the earth.

Our latest congregational statistical survey for 2011

showed that First Presbyterian Church has interesting balance to our demographics,
hence our energy, I would contend.

We have 321 female members and 247 male members.

We have 141 members under age 25 and 136 members over age 65.

We have 8 Asian members, 12 African American members,
47 African members, 5 Hispanic members, and 495 Caucasian members,
more or less.

We can assess our state of balance by gender; we can measure our balance by age;
we can weigh our balance by ethnicity.

But, can we measure the healthy balance of our congregation
based upon disability inclusion? Is that measurable?

Our statistical report claims we have 49 persons with either hearing, sight, or mobility issues.

But this says nothing of mental or emotional health, of learning capabilities,
or of some of the problems that can come with aging.

Do we have a salty balance of healthy members

and of those “in need of a physician,” as Jesus would perhaps ask?

And, if not, how do we encourage and foster such a balance, to

“spend ourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
so that our light will rise in the darkness and our night will become like the
noonday?” (Isaiah 55:10)

We are the salt of the earth, agents of balance. This is both our identity and our challenge.

Light! Jesus points his finger again squarely at us and says,

“**YOU** are the light of the world!”

It will remind us again that later in John's Gospel,

Jesus proclaims, *“I am the light of the world.”*

And then he spits on the ground, makes some mud with his saliva,
applies it to a blind man's eyes, and sends him away, amazing-grace, sighted.

(John 9:5–7)

What Jesus is, we are too, by his own admission, light of the world.

Our identity as believers is identical to Jesus' identity on this point;

we are one, enmeshed, conjoined, inseparable: “light of the world-mates.”

And so is our agency identical. We are called to be *light* to those who live in darkness.

The Greek word for light is *phos* (φως);

the Greek for world or humankind is *kosmos* (κόσμος),

Phos for the kosmos! Quite a charge to us!

When I read this, I couldn't help but think of John Milton's beautiful sonnet,

On His Blindness, composed around 1655 when this writer of *Paradise Lost*
was tragically struck blind at the age of 44.

In the sonnet, Milton laments his plight to God: the loss of what he considers

his salient gift to the world in service to God, his ability to read and to write,
now rendered “useless,” to him, by the sudden loss of his eyesight.

And the classic question which he poses to God, “fondly,” is this:

“Doth (does) God exact day-labor, light denied?”

It's an excellent question, which we in the church should be asking every day.

If someone is denied sight, seeing, vision, hearing, mobility, speech,

understanding, memory, does God expect that person

to continue to function in the world and to

“glorify God and praise Him forever,” as the Westminster Catechism suggests?

Is this, perhaps, the responsibility of the church, the light of the world,

to make sure that those who are “light-denied” still are able

to work, serve and worship God by whatever means deemed necessary?
And is it also the responsibility of the church, to destabilize the status quo
by shedding favorable light and showing favor toward those
who are dispossessed or marginalized by society
because of their inability to see, hear, move, speak, work or remember?
Dorothy Graham, one of my favorite "saints" in this church is somewhat light-denied,
although it certainly doesn't seem to slow her down terribly.
She is losing her eyesight, and she will tell you that one of the best ways we can assist her
is by providing good lighting all around the church.
Do we? Have we made that assessment of our facility to make sure that all
who are "light-denied" are able to function as normally as possible here?
Have we been "light" to Dorothy and to those like her,
or do we just hope that they get around the church on their own
without slipping or falling?

I'll never forget taking my mother to church on Easter Sunday in 1979,
when she was visually impaired due to a brain tumor, had lost
her hair to chemotherapy, and was in a wheelchair.
But she wanted to go and sing the Easter hymns, and we wanted her to be able to go.
So we dressed her up beautifully, put on her wig, and rolled her into
the back of the church so she could sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today"
with all the fanfare of trumpet, organ and timpani.
It tired her out being there, but she had the time of her shortened life.
Some of her "friends," however, chided us for bringing her,
especially on Easter Sunday.

"She shouldn't be here," they said. "She's too sick to be here."

It makes everyone feel bad to see her like this, especially on Easter Sunday!"
I won't tell you what I really wanted to say or do to them!
A little poultice of spit and mud applied to their eyes, perhaps.

But I will tell you that I wondered then who was really "light-denied" and who was "sighted"
and who was actually ministering to whom.

And I also will admit that my call to ministry probably begin to germinate at that moment
and sent out a tap root, long before I recognized it as such.

We are the light of the world: illuminators for others.

This is both our identity and our challenge.

City! A city on a hill cannot be hidden, Jesus says.

The reference is to Jerusalem, the holy city on the hill,

the location of the Temple, the center of their worship life, the locale of their
high holy days, the destination of every pilgrimage.

Psalm 15 begins with this question:

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

And who may dwell on your holy hill? (Psalm 15:1)

It's an excellent question, which the church also needs to keep asking.

The answer which the psalmist gives has to do with those who walk blamelessly,

(that is, assuming that they can walk)

and those who speak the truth from their heart,

(that is, assuming that they can speak, that they can understand truth from
falsehood, that their hearts are functioning normally).

You get my drift.

Our blindness is often an assumption that our places of worship, our temples, our holy hills

ARE open and welcoming... to those who can get up there on their own
and fend for themselves.

Desmond Tutu, in his book, *God Has A Dream*, speaks of an African concept

called *ubuntu*, which has to do with our being "set in a delicate network
of interdependence with our fellow human beings and

with the rest of God's creation". (Tutu, *God Has A Dream*, p. 25)

Tutu says, "It (*ubuntu*) speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up

and inextricably bound up in yours...

It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion.

A person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share.

Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable,
affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good,
for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing
that they belong to a greater whole.

They know they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished,
treated as if they were less than who they are.

The quality of *ubuntu* gives people resilience, enabling them to survive
and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.

You know when *ubuntu* is there, and it is obvious when it is absent," Tutu says.

"It has to do with what it means to be truly human,
to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life." (Tutu, p. 26)

Ah yes, the bundle of life...

We experienced quite a bundle of life this week at Vacation Church School
with almost 200 children representing six congregations in Durham.

Among those remarkable children, I noticed one "otherwise-abled" child
with a prosthetic leg, who happens to be a tri-athlete,
three children with Down's Syndrome,
one child with noticeable growth deficiency,
at least one child with a cognitive situation that required a one-on-one buddy,
and one brave little girl who broke her collarbone during the week,
but who managed to come back the next day, and the next day
with her arm in a sling.

Ubuntu was alive and well at Camp New Hope throughout the week,
the bundle of life, the salty twist of abilities,
the organic, holistic environment of healthy interdependence.

This concept of *ubuntu* says to me, if everyone cannot access and dwell on God's
holy hill, then none of us should access and dwell on God's holy hill.

A city on a hill, a temple on a hill, a people on a hill should not be hidden,
but should be made accessible to all so that everyone might give glory to our
Father in heaven.

Who are we as a faith community, and how does our identity shape our acts and deeds?
Jesus asks this of us, on the backside of the beatitudes,
 which cast light on the kingdom values of blessing those who are dispossessed,
 caring for those who suffer loss, seeking justice, loving mercy,
 living with integrity, acting as peacemakers, and courageously
 standing for those who believe.

We are salt of the earth. We are light-bearers to the world. We are a city on a hill.

Are we these things at the expense of others or on behalf of others?

The greatest good of all humankind, of the earth, is our calling. Amen.