

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. **15** People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. **18** For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,^(a) not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. **19** Therefore, whoever breaks^(b) one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 58:1-9a

58 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. **2** Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. **4** Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. **5** Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? **6** Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? **7** Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. **9** Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

“Blessed to be a Blessing”

“You are the salt of the earth.” “ You are the light of the world” These are the words with which Jesus continues his preaching of the Sermon on the Mount. The message he has just finished includes the blessings, the beatitudes, the conditions of happiness, contentedness, that we are given by God when we surrender ourselves to nothing else but living God’s way. (*i.e. Blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart, etc*). But now he turns to what it means to “BE a blessing”. He shifts from the passive concept of “being blessed” to active images of how to “be a blessing,” to images of salt and light.

Consider salt. Salt really is an amazing, life sustaining mineral. It was of such great value in the ancient world that it was sometimes used as currency. In fact, the word "salary" comes from the practice of paying a worker with salt. Salt acts as a preservative, melts ice and of course, enhances the flavor of foods. In Jesus’ day, salt had many impurities in it and consequently those impurities could go bad and cause the salt’s taste to go off. Then, it was not useful for flavoring. When Jesus speaks of us being the “salt of the earth” he is saying we have use, a function to perform, a responsibility in this kingdom, a responsibility of being ones who work in relation to others. So just as salt draws out, enhances, the best and true flavors of the food it touches, we can call forth or draw out the good in others. And just as it preserves food by allowing food to hold on to its good, we can help people relate with their past, retain the good of their history, and be their best selves in the present. And just as salt allows people to move forward when it’s put down on ice or snow, we can help others relate with their futures, futures that may not have otherwise been imagined.¹

The same is true with light. Like salt, it is pretty amazing, most useful in working in relation to what it comes in contact with. Light energy is absorbed by the chlorophyll of plants, thus making possible photosynthesis, the most basic building block for life. Light also warms and illumines God’s world. It shows the path for those who are seeking, trying to find their way. An object’s color results from the way it reflects the particular light that is falling on it.

¹ Susan Pendleton Jones. “Salt & Light”. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/63c6adea6615fb308400002f/susan-pendleton-jones-salt-and-light>. (accessed 2-1-23).

Without light, there is darkness and in darkness, people can get lost or fall. That's why Jesus says we are to be as a city on a hill, letting our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works... and so that they can give glory to God! To God! We shine God's light in the world not for our own sake, but so that others may see the way of God. ²

So, ultimately with these images, Jesus is saying that we are blessed to be a blessing. When we surrender our own interests, make ourselves open and empty, we are blessed...pure in heart, meek, poor in spirit, hungry and thirsting... and then we are able to be filled up with God's love and grace and be blessings to the world. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda says it this way, "Jesus is here making the bold assertion that his followers, all of us, are grains of salt through whom the "inward flavor of the infinite" is encountered by others."³ Inward flavor of the infinite is encountered...nice. Yes, our work of adding an inward flavor the infinite to the world is critical, so he warns us not to hide our gifts of salt and light under a basket.

Eugene Peterson beautifully translates our text like this: "*Let me tell you why you are here. You're here as salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?...And "you're here as light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. Since I've made you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. So—shine!"*

(*long pause*). You know, friends, siblings in Christ, the last time I preached on this text was Feb 14, 2014. It was, I think, the second sermon I gave here as Pastor of FPC-CC, and at that time I ended my sermon by challenging you to take stock of your identity and the direction that was so very apparent in a church with a heritage of 50 years...to take stock of the good things you'd done. I encouraged you to bask in God's pleasure and let it fuel your cooperative spirit, your imagination and your courage as we were about to venture forward together, and let nothing steal your flavor or cover up your light.

² The Rev. Dr. Christopher Thomas "Salty Luminescence" https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037f9/salty_luminescence. (accessed 2-2-23).

³Naruda. Quoted in Charles Hoffacker. "Talking to the Salt, Epiphany 5 (A)".<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/talking-to-the-salt-epiphany-5-a-february-5-2023/> (accessed 2-4-23).

Well, it is 9 years later and my goodness, have you done THAT! By the power of the Spirit in our midst, you have let your salty luminescence make such a difference to so many. Just think of how many people you've helped to simply feed through your contributions to Souper Bowl of Caring. Just think....all these years collecting food as we are doing today and next week. How many homeless have been feed with the hundreds of sandwiches you made during mission months? And how many people have been cared for during times of crisis through your preparation of the hygiene kits for PDA or for the Border ministries? Snack packs have been delivered to those who were hot and tired, waiting outside the Free Clinic, and similar packs were also prepared with love for the abused and neglected children in the care of Rainbow Room. Do you remember when FPC collected enough money at one of our dessert auctions to buy a cow for a village in Africa, a donation that was matched by a donor through the PMA? Can you imagine the difference that made in the recipients' lives? You've made baby blankets for new mothers in Zambia and collected diapers for babies in Copperas Cove. You've regularly cared for veterans though Stand Down Central Texas, supported our furry friends with donations to the shelters, and provided needed supplies for victims during hurricanes or other local disasters. You've donated blood, planted gardens, filled backpacks and written hundreds of greeting cards. Prayers, fervent prayers, have been said not only for our own family members but for the grieving and exhausted during COVID, for those in nursing homes or assisted living centers, for the oppressed around the world, for children, born and unborn. I don't think anyone can count how many people, down on their luck, have been furnished a night at a hotel or a card for gas or food from visiting our doors. The list goes on and on and on and on.

You've shone your light, FPC! And you've spread your saltiness around inside and outside of these doors. You've understood that a church does not exist simply for its own members but for the community, the city, the world that God loves. You have understood that the church of Jesus Christ goes out of its way to welcome everyone and makes no distinction between all who stand under the cross. You've understood that living fully, enjoying this good and exquisite world, is a way of praising and giving glory to our Creator. And finally, you've

understood that joining this church (and 99 have in the last 9 years), loving it and investing in it, even simply showing up each week to study, sing, pray in it means that you accept and become part of all of this.

Today, I want to challenge you once again, sibliings in Christ, to feel God's pleasure and be encouraged to follow Jesus, using your salty luminescence to reflect an "inward flavor of the infinite" to the world, to continue to help bring God's kingdom to earth, even if in as modest a way as loving a child, a neighbor, a stranger. Know that you have been chosen, friends, you have been beautifully blessed to be a blessing! So, humbly let your light shine. Let your light shine for him.

To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.