

“Salt of the Earth”
(Matt 5:13-20)

2/5/23
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There is a cartoon by Gary Larson that shows a picture of God as a cook in the kitchen. Behind him on the shelf are a bunch of seasonings, like salt and pepper shakers. One is labeled birds, another insects, another is labeled light skinned people, another labeled dark-skinned people. And God is standing in front of a pan with the earth in it, getting ready to sprinkle seasoning on the earth from a shaker labeled “Jerks.” And the bubble caption coming out of his head says, “and just to make it interesting.” (Display the cartoon?)

Gary Larson has a snarky sense of humor. He makes the point that God didn’t just create creatures who are all one flavor. But he does it in a way that draws attention to the fact that there are going to be some flavors that any one of us will find particularly irritating. A larger and more basic point that we can draw from the cartoon is that, if we are to be true to our design, each of us will bring some form of “spiciness” or flavor to the world.

It is a clever cartoon that came to mind as I was reading the phrase, “you are the salt of the earth.” I take that phrase,” to mean that are to have character. So, when somebody says, “That guy is a bit salty,” I

think to myself, “Hmmm, That could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing or both.” At the very least, it probably means that the person is going to be transparently himself or herself. Probably not phony or pretentious **or** overly reserved **or** exhausted to the extent that you can’t get a good read. If you can’t taste anything, that would be a case of salt that has “lost its flavor”.

The Laughing Lady

As I began this sermon, I was sitting at a table at the Rendezvous in Turner’s Falls on a Friday night, waiting for Sheryl to join me. A bluegrass band was playing (that I think Sterling would like). And there were several women at the table next to me talking. And one of them was laughing out loud in a way that punctuated their conversation.

You could tell that she was really enjoying herself, because her laugh was full and uninhibited. I wish I could recreate it for you. It was the laughter of someone who wasn’t feeling self-conscious or aware of what she sounded like. She wasn’t drunk or being kookie. She was just being herself. It was a very unique laugh, kind of like a fingerprint, so that if you knew her it would be instantly recognizable. And it was

infectious. I realized that I was smiling too, even though I had no idea what they were talking about or what was making her laugh.

I remember how my dad used to laugh. He grew up in Japan, where traditional people always cover their mouths when they laugh. His laugh sounded like a cartoon character named Mutley in a show called the “Wacky Races.” Whenever the villain, a guy named Dick Dastardly, played an underhanded trick on someone, his dog Mutley would laugh appreciatively, sort of like “ ssss, sssss, sssss, ssss”. Of course my dad wasn’t underhanded. It was just the way he laughed. It was a very peculiar laugh, that actually revealed a lot about who he was.

Somehow, when a person is just being who they are and their personality comes through in a laugh or some other kind of earnest expression, it is a comforting thing. It makes you feel connected and interested.

I’m actually a rather shy and cautious person by nature. There have been periods in my life where I was very lonely and full of worry. Times when I didn’t know what my own laughter sounded like, because I was too self-conscious and serious to be able to laugh at all. I dreaded being told jokes, because I felt that it would reveal my inability to laugh.

But when I come to church and encounter the people around me, a certain happiness enters me, I feel touched by a Spirit that allows me to be more myself and suddenly I just want to participate in doing good things and to do the things that will keep us connected and not leave anyone out. It is funny how it works. The Spirit slips in unnoticed.. And you don't know it is with you, until it is already there.

And when that happens, I'm not exactly sure how I come across. But I'm not able to be too concerned about it. I am who I am and something is going to come across. I think maybe I'm a little too bubbly and wishy-washy, for people who like their men to be more "manly." When I am caught up in that spirit, I think that I must be like the laughing lady.

I don't think I'll ever feel uninhibited enough to behave as freely and easily as she does. Remember that I come from a family where dad covers his mouth and goes "ssss, ssss, ssss." But I do feel that God loosens me up enough to give my enough moments when my life can carry the joyful ring that I hear in her laughter.

Leaning into Life

What then does it mean to be the salt of the earth? *I think it means that you come across as someone who somehow leans into life with an infectious gusto.* And it may seem strange to think of laughter as an example of saltiness. But you can tell that people are leaning into life by their laughter and their laughter reveals character, flavors our lives and draws us together.

It seems to me that laughter is both a very earthly and spiritual thing. A sort of coming together of earth and heaven inside a person. There was even for a time, a popular picture of the “laughing Jesus.” People who are really laughing seem to be having a series of mini-seizures, going back and forth between an in-the-body and out-of-body experience, that is very pleasureable and even a little painful in a good way.

And there is a similar kind of leaning into life and experience of both pain and pleasure, you can feel in areas of life apart from laughter, when you are around people who care about life so much because of the beauty they see in it, while at the same time they suffer when they see it harmed. They forget to hide themselves because they are leaning

into what they are saying or doing, caring for the life around them with purpose. It is infectious. And by association, you feel yourself caught up in what they are experiencing.

God the keyboardist

Sometimes, when I am sitting in church, listening to the music being played, I wonder to myself “How does the keyboardist put such wonderful feeling into the keys and why does it have such a powerful effect on me?” You would think that when a finger hits a key it would just go “plunk” and what would come out is simply a note. And you would think that hitting several keys together and in sequence would just mean a lots of “plunks.”

But when gifted keyboardists like Ann touch the keys with their fingers, the notes and the chords don’t just “plunk.” They somehow carry an emotional charge that feeds us spiritually. I don’t think it is so different from the way God works with us; that we are keys on God’s piano and God is the pianist. It is a wonderful miracle, that none of us really understands.

So it seems to me that being salt as a human being is a very social thing. No pianist sits down and plays one note over and over again and no one

eats salt by itself. The value of the flavor in both cases depends on the fact that it is part of a combination of flavors and a complement to whatever it is being added to. Likewise a “salty person” only really makes sense as part of a community and as a complement to the overall flavor of the community.

I think then, that when Jesus laments over “salt that has lost its saltiness”, one of things he is lamenting over is those who fall away from community. If I become so distracted by my personal worries that I am no longer able to pay attention to what is going on in my community or if I overly mistrust or develop a grudge against my community and minimize my engagement with it, then as far as everyone else is concerned, I become an inactive ingredient; like an inconsequential shadow and less and less like a fully present human being. I become salt that has lost its flavor.

As a result, communities in which people are only minimally engaged, become bland and flavorless places, emptied of joy. Whereas communities in which the people are leaning into and engaging in a shared life are flavorful communities.

For us as a church this means allowing ourselves to be authentically caught up in the presence of the Holy Spirit. So that when any one of us feels God's put his finger on our key, we can trust that spirit and lean into the world and deliver that pure note that God wants to send through us - as a contribution to the greater "love sonata" that God is composing.

You may say, "Now hold on." This is New England and we don't wear our hearts on our sleeves like that. Can we not talk about being pure notes in "God's love sonata?" That sounds way too intimate and romantic a way to talk about our life together. Up here in the cold north, we prefer to be somewhat reserved; to hold our cards close to our chests, at least until we know what we are dealing with.

I do see the point in maintaining a certain reserve. In fact, I am personally much more comfortable with it. And I don't think that maintain a certain reserve is inconsistent with letting our lights shine or being the salt of the earth.

I think it has more to do with the depth with which we feel God's love present in our own lives and how deeply we identify with God's love for the world. And it seems to me that, if we truly feel God's love, then

that love will express itself through us, through laughter and all the other ways we lean into life, making us salt and light for the world, in spite of our uncertainties, inhibitions and other cultural traits.

As we move today to our Annual Meeting and to the consideration of finances and the nuts and bolts of what we do, it is easy to think that those are the more important things that the congregation depends on for its existence. But those things, although vital are, I believe, secondary. The most important things are the very things we tend to think of as inconsequential or silly, like the ability to laugh and to cry and enjoy each other's company, letting God's love be alive in us, to such an extent that we are leaning into our life together. Then we are like salt to flavor the world and light for a world that is too often lost and lonely.