

A Salty Fast

When Jesus gathers his earliest disciples around him, Matthew tells us he has seated himself on a mountain side. Traditionally a seated teacher would provide knowledge to those gathered around him. Throughout God's revelations to those claimed, teachings delivered on or from a mountain were important, we key instructions and were given by one with authority. Beginning with the tablets brought down by Moses from Mount Sinai to those Jesus gives to the disciples he has gathered. After the opening blessings given which are recorded as the Beatitudes, Jesus goes on to give additional blessing and to offer them a promise describing their identity: "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus also proclaims to them: "You are the light of the world." It is important to note that Jesus places these two identity markers describing them in the present tense; not the future. He does not say you will be...he tells them they already are "salt" and "light" for the world. These two attributes of their identity do relate to the future functions of those who choose to follow him, but these characteristics become part of them when they chose to follow. These are great and holy attributes and promises for the roles they will have as disciples. These attributes form the identity of those who follow Jesus. It is one thing to know, to have knowledge of these things as our identity, but it is another thing entirely to live out that identity. Those first disciples have learned who they are...the blessed. Now they need to learn and to know what difference this blessing means for their lives. Knowledge without action is an impediment to the implementation—the bringing near God's reign. This truth might be considered the theme of Jesus' teachings. Knowledge without purpose does not bring the kingdom near. All too often this is what our churches are like...what our discipleship is like. We have a lot of information about Jesus, about God, about the Holy Spirit to share, but that is as far as it goes. We tend to amass information for information's sake but not to implement into our daily activities; not using it for the difference it might actually make for another. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us that knowledge about God cannot exist as simply knowledge without actions. Knowledge about God, theology, if you will, is to find God's presence in the world. It is not enough to know about God. As disciples we have to be the activity which shows God's presence in the world; in our community; in our lives. We are called to live out our identity as salt and light for the world. Living out that identity calls us to leave our comfort zones; to abandon our default settings which lean toward comfort, conformity, and complacency with the way things are. What Jesus really needs from us is to live out our identity as salt and light. To be the salt that just might sting and the light that just might expose what we do not want to see in our society. When used correctly we find that salt in our food can call out flavors from other ingredients and bring a dish alive. Salt can also act as a preservative as anyone growing up in rural areas knows about how pork killed in the fall was preserved through salting before refrigeration and freezers were common. Salt can also clean and aid in healing for wounds. The benefits of salt are recorded in many places in Hebrew Scriptures representing sacrifices, covenant fidelity, and creating binding relationships through sharing salted food. Jesus gives us this role of being salt and light in this teaching. As salt we are to bring out the best in others—that goodness God has already created within them. We cleanse. We preserve. We bind. This is an evocative, multilayered metaphor for discipleship. As light we are to reflect God's light and love to share it and to enlighten the dark areas. Verse 13 gives us a strong emphasis that Jesus' disciples are called to share the gifts and blessings of

their role; to share their experience of God's love with the world. In fact this theme of sharing of spreading what they have received is found throughout the entire passage. As a southerner I enjoyed the words found in a commentary about the nature of English nouns/and pronouns as opposed to those in the Greek. Greek nouns give not only gender but number so in the presence of all the you's this passage contains, the English does not give a good idea that the word is given not in the singular but the plural. So y'all are the salt; y'all are the light would express the meaning in a clearer manner. Being salt and light is a property belonging to the called community. Our saltiness does not occur in a vacuum but through our connectedness. We cannot really follow Jesus' example unless we are united with others in revealing our identify. This community relationship allows us all to become who God intends us to be. It is interesting to note that salt is not an element useful in or by itself. Its value comes in its application and effect on other things. So, like the element sodium chloride, Jesus' followers are called to exist connected to others and in service to others. Yet, Jesus does warn that salt may lose its taste, may lose its function and usefulness. Think about how dilutions can reduce the effectiveness of salt. As disciples, if we allow things other than our role to be salt and light for the world to dominate our concerns, then we lose our saltiness—our ability to do the role Jesus gave us—to be a blessing to others. Concerns not related to our being a blessing to others can reduce the ability for others to see God's light within us. When Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, it is usually because their concern over rituals has superseded their concern over others...thus their light is dimmed and their saltiness diluted. In the same way that light functions to allow humans to see, we understand the importance of light even today when electricity gives us control over physical darkness most of the time. Our control over light has diluted the impact of this image for us. In Jesus' time when it was nightfall it was truly dark. Isaiah says, "in darkness we grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have not eyes." However, Jesus uses this in a slightly different way. Light is not simply to allow others to see what they wish but it is for others to witness the acts of justice that Jesus' follows perform. Even more than that, the light within allows others to recognize the source of the light; the cause of these acts for justice: God and God's overflowing love for all humanity. Jesus warns that he has not come to change the law or what the prophet have taught. He shares many beliefs about the tradition with the Pharisees. Jesus believed in resurrection, future rewards and punishments, and the activity of angels and demons in the world. He shared with the Pharisees the idea that the laws should be applied to all areas of life. Jesus was a law-abiding Jew so that nothing from past revelations about how to live is to be abandoned. What Jesus adds is that he has come to fulfill the law, to re-interpret what has been taught to restore God's love and concern into how the law is understood. Jesus teaches about God's concern for the least, the lost and the last is more important than legal attention to rituals. In other words, the Torah is more important for obedient living than the rituals found within. Our reading from Isaiah 58 provides an opportunity to lift up the quintessential concerns of the prophetic message—those teachings Jesus says he did not come to set aside. Isaiah 58 gives us a description of a people who are religiously practicing the ritual of their tradition but complain that God is not paying attention to their needs, their situation. The people's complaint is succinct: "We fast, but you, God, do not seem to see it. Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Their complaint focuses on a single action—their fasting—to the exclusion of all other actions. This omission seems to be important since

God's response will include other aspects of worship. It is important to remember that fasting is associated with pious activity as well as penitence and mourning in Hebrew Scriptures. It was not a meaningless activity. This passage should not incline us to critique too harshly religious rituals; they are not inherently legalistic or futile; but if not a part of broader behavior, they can indeed become legalistic...diluted to ineffectiveness. As with the Pharisees, and sometimes within our own worship practices, this can happen. God's response to the people's complaint is to observe their fasting does not lead to better behavior. It does not lead them to treat their neighbors or workers well. The ritual does them no good because it does not change them. In fact, their feasting is selfish, it is oppressive, and it is violent. Their fasting has not been integrated into the other areas of these worshippers' lives; it does not lead to ethical treatment of others. The fast God chooses indicates concern with the prosperity of all in the society, with liberation from injustices, with freedom from oppression. God's chosen fast involves breaking bread with the hungry. Perhaps Isaiah and other 8th B.C. prophets are showing people how they are to be salt and light for others. Jesus came to reform, not to reject what they taught about God's priorities. He came to reform his tradition and the way God's ways were taught. His disciples are to take up the role from Isaiah to be a light to the world. Jewish rabbis saw the Torah as mediator of God's light. As Christians we attribute this role to Jesus. Our job description to be salt and light for the whole world is directed to be one that exists far beyond the narrow circle of those we know. As salt and light we are to do things which glorify God and God's presence among us, not to draw attention to ourselves. Salt's function is to enhance other ingredients; salty disciples point the way to God, strengthen others. Light illuminates other objects in the area and highlights them. Being salt and light in the world by living the commandments and virtues Jesus states leads to blessedness given by God. Disciples are to live in the present world but aid in the in-breaking that Jesus is bringing which will not be completed until God brings that reign fully. Some people are discouraged by the expectations they feel are required of disciples to bring light to the world. They view the role as an impossible task. But in the final analysis, it isn't because it is not just about what we can do, but about what God is doing through us. The Sermon on the Mount presents a vision for the life of the community of disciples to which each of us disciples contributes. We are to read it, be inspired by it, and then move toward the goal of being salt and light in our community, in our neighborhood, in our world. We are to read it as a way of living in keeping with God's vision for humankind made possible by the demanding but also forgiving and empowering presence that is God with us in Jesus. It isn't enough for us to just hear these words of Jesus, to study them; to be inspired by them; to have hopes, aspirations or dreams based on them. We need to act on them; practice living into them; and live them in our everyday lives. Given the scope of tastelessness and the depth of darkness that pervades our globe presently, it is easy to feel the "wattage" is running low on our Jesus given light as we witness the injustices and hatreds around us. We sometimes have trouble letting our light shine; shouting out so our salt and light are clearly seen. We want to hide and not be noticed as standing out from the crowd. Yet history shows us the disasters that come from inaction in the presence of injustice. After blessing us, Jesus has told us who we are: we are salt and light for the world. He also tells us what comes when we received that blessing...we are given the role to go out into the world and be a blessing to and for others. The fast we are told to choose is to be salty and reflective of

God's presence; fasting from the behaviors of our world's brokenness. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.