

“Lightly Salted” GPPC 2-5-17  
Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

In the comedy, “Dumb and Dumber” (which I have not actually seen) Lloyd, played by the perpetually goofy Jim Carrey, is pursuing his love interest Mary, played by the lovely Lauren Holly. Lloyd says to Mary, “I want to ask you a question, straight out, flat out, and I want you to give me the honest answer. What do you think the chances are of a guy like you and a girl like me ending up together?”

“Well Lloyd, [she answers] that's difficult to say. We really don't...

“Hit me with it! Just give it to me straight! I came a long way just to see you Mary, just... The least you can do is level with me. What are my chances?”

“Not good. [She says]

“You mean, not good like one out of a hundred?”

“I'd say more like one out of a million.

[There's a long pause while Lloyd thinks.] “At last he says, ‘So you're telling me there's a chance. Yeah!’”

Jeff Paschal

Let it never be said that you don't hear quotes from the classics during worship at Guilford Park.

Do you love those movies and stories in which the odds against the hero or heroine are impossible? Think Rocky against Apollo Creed. Or go with real life impossible odds. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu against South African apartheid. Can you think of others who beat impossible odds?

Jesus and his first disciples lived under the domination of the Roman Empire that lasted about five hundred years, with two hundred of those years known as the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. The Empire was good at a lot of things: constructing buildings, dams, roads, aqueducts, sewage disposal systems, writing laws and developing sophisticated government, creating art, notably sculptures that still stand today. And especially the Empire was known and feared for its powerful and ruthless military that enforced the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace.

Of course, as we discussed in one of the Sunday School classes a couple of weeks ago, for most people in the Empire the Roman Peace

Jeff Paschal

was peace in name only. Unless you were well-placed in the Roman government, life under the Empire was hard. Not only did the egotistical Roman Emperors rule by threat and fear, but a number of these emperors appear to have been certifiably insane. Because of their devotion to Christ as Lord, Christians experienced sporadic persecution under some emperors and full-blown torture and murder under others.

Luke says Jesus was born during the reign of Emperor Augustus and scholars estimate the Empire had 70 to 90 million people in it at that time. Do the math. Emperor Augustus with his Roman Legions (the best military on the face of the earth) ruling over 70 to 90 million subjects.

And how many disciples does Jesus have? Um. Twelve.

So you're telling me there's a chance. Yeah!

If you were in church last Sunday, you heard Jesus give his peculiar blessings, his strange beatitudes to the disciples (with maybe some sort of crowd listening too). The last of his beatitudes went, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all

Jeff Paschal

kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” This is the group Jesus speaks to today.

He says, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It’s useless. You might as well throw it out.”

Now in some ways this statement doesn’t make sense, because technically salt does not lose its taste. Salt stays salt. Period.

But, of course, in another way salt does lose its taste. How? When it gets exposed to moisture, it can become diluted. The Greek can be literally translated as, “If salt has become foolish” or “If salt has become dumb. How can its saltiness be restored?” Salt doesn’t cease to be salt, but it can certainly become diluted and, according to Jesus, it can become foolish or dumb.

There is a scene in that old Disney children’s movie, “The Lion King.” Mufasa, the great lion and father of Simba has been killed by treachery. And young adult Simba begins to drift through life allowing the world around him to fall apart and to fall into the hands of evil

Jeff Paschal

because of his neglect. One day Mufasa appears to Simba in a kind of vision. Mufasa says to his son, “Simba, you have forgotten me.” “No. How could I?” “You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become.”

You are more than what you have become. If salt loses its saltiness, if it becomes foolish and dumb, what good is it?

And then Jesus adds another metaphor. He says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”

This metaphor is similar to the salt metaphor, right? The disciples of Jesus receive an affirmation, “You are light,” followed by a warning, “Don’t hide your light.” So we’ve been duly warned about becoming less than we are, not once but twice.

But this morning let’s focus more on the affirmations, and less on the warnings. “You are the salt of the earth.” What does salt do? It

Jeff Paschal

flavors and preserves. It's also necessary for us to live; human beings must have salt or we die. But salt, we remember, is not the main course. Salt is an influencer.

Light is similar. It illumines our way. Light reveals and clarifies. And even a tiny bit of light can be seen for miles. A city on a hill can't be hid. Even a lamp put on a lampstand will light the whole house. Like salt, light influences. And both salt and light are minority images. Salt is not the main course, but it absolutely flavors it. Light shines in the darkness around it. Minority not majority images.

We are salt and light—lessor parts of the greater. It's so important to keep that in mind, because it's easy for us to become discouraged. A character in a novel thinks to himself, "Why bother to make music when the silence and wind are so much larger? Why light lamps when the darkness will inevitably snuff them?" (Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, 365.)

But Jesus does not call us to wallow in disappointment or worry. A spiritual writer says a French Jesuit priest/theologian "volunteered as a

Jeff Paschal

medic during World War I. From the trenches he wrote wise and cheerful letters to his childhood companion and cousin Marguerite, who was struggling with the uncertainties of war-torn France on the home front. ‘Above all,’ he advised her, ‘trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new...Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.’” (Deborah Smith Douglas quoting Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *Weavings*, May/June/July 2014, 36.)

Do not be afraid. Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

And notice Jesus does not say to the church, “You ought to be salt and light, or you should be salt and light.” No. He says, “You *are* salt and light. Don’t forget it. Be who you are for the glory of God.”

So maybe a lonely stranger comes through these doors on a Sunday morning. And one of our members says, “Good morning” and

Jeff Paschal

chats with that person for just a moment. Neither ignoring nor prying. Just welcoming. And it makes a difference.

Families gather in the pews to worship together and for the next generation to learn the Christian faith that will sustain them through their lives. Light in the darkness.

A group of teenage boys whose families are trying to escape poverty and homelessness are brought to our church to play basketball. To go out for a meal. To take in a Greensboro Swarm game. To talk about their joys and struggles and be accepted as they are and challenged to grow. A few of them go to college. All of them know they are priceless.

Our prayer chain prays for people who are ill or hurting or in need. People find direction and comfort and challenge as they study the Bible and other books for faith formation. Fellowship groups provide gladness and support. Light in the darkness.

A family fleeing persecution in the Congo comes into our country and is shown Christian hospitality by our congregation. Our church

Jeff Paschal

members—adults, youth, and children--go and feed the hungry and homeless. We sing to them and bring a word of hope to them. A pinch of salt.

A group of our members calls for all people to be treated with dignity. And they call our leaders and our country to welcome the immigrant and the stranger as God commands through the Prophets and Jesus. Salt and light. And these are just a few examples from our own congregation. Imagine the church around the world, in every time and place. What is God doing through that church for the glory of God? What might God be calling you or me to do for the glory of God?

Anne Lamott tells about a man who protested our country's involvement in yet another war by standing, as she says, "in front of the White House night after night with a candle. One rainy night, a reporter asked him, '[Sir], do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night with a candle?' 'Oh,' [he] replied, 'I don't do it to change the country, I do it so

Jeff Paschal

the country won't change me.'" (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 141-142.)

So we do not lose our flavor. We do not hide our light. Against seemingly impossible odds, we trust in the slow work of God. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Glory to God. Amen.

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