

February 9, 2020 **Best Kept Secrets** (*Matthew 5:13-20*) Rev. Jane Courtright

When I was little, my Mom's parents had a HUGE vegetable garden out in the country in Twin Lakes, Pennsylvania. It was SO big that it had a fence around it (to keep deer and other critters out) and a swinging gate!

My Mom had lots of childhood stories about long, hot afternoons weeding the garden. I don't think it's any coincidence that when we were kids, Mom chose to have a small border flower garden! Still, while we lived in Pennsylvania (until I was going into 5th grade) we had our fill of fresh vegetables. My grandmother would can any leftover crops. This was before people were into freezing extras!

My grandmother had stories about her ancestors preserving their bumper crops in a different way: they would sometimes dry produce, or they'd salt it. How? She described huge crocks, into which they would first put a layer of sliced vegetables (such as green beans,) then a layer of salt, then a layer of vegetables, a layer of salt, and so on until the crock was full. It would be tightly sealed, and those beans would keep for months!

It didn't sound healthy or tasty to me as child, but Grandma said that when the salt was rinsed off, those veges tasted pretty good!

Today's gospel reading is really a part of the Sermon on the Mount or the Beattitudes – which fill up 3 chapters in Matthew. It kinds of sums up Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom or Realm of heaven.

Today's reading immediately follows the Beattitudes – in which you'll remember, Jesus tells his listeners, the disciples, that they are blessed. And that therefore, they are to act like they are blessed! Jesus says that along with blessings, come responsibilities. The responsibilities of Kingdom People or People of the Way are to be light and SALT to the world.

What did Jesus mean by salt and light?

First off, it's important to notice that Jesus speaks about how his followers should BE, not about what they should say or do. We'll come back to that later!

In Jesus' time, salt was something very treasured, not JUST as something to preserve vegetables. Salt had 3 main uses back then: it was a purifying and antibacterial substance, it WAS a preservative, and of course, it gave food great taste!

People would put salt on wounds, not to be sadistic, but because it was the only thing they knew to do. They knew that a wound could get infected, even develop gangrene – if salt was not used. As we've already noted, salt was used to preserve food before the time of refrigeration. And then, just like now (though we know now that we shouldn't eat too much of it) salt is used to make food taste even better!

You may remember that the last Beatitude was: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Then it goes on to spell it out more specifically: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account... for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who came before you."

Today's command to BE light assumes that the world is living in darkness and can't see its way. That the world needs some light to show the way – but it will never be an easy thing to be – LIGHT. Because light makes the dirt visible, and hasn't the world always persecuted anyone who stands out from the crowd?

This is all new stuff for Jesus followers! (new stuff for some of us also!) Suddenly, it's not the ruling higher-ups who'll dictate how the world should be – it's perfectly ordinary people who will live their own lives with love and integrity.

And if THAT'S not enough, Jesus makes it even more challenging by saying that the Hebrew Scriptures are not cancelled out by his teachings – we are to pay attention to them as well. Many of the Pharisees, despite their bad reputation, were righteous people who kept the religious laws. Jesus is saying that his followers will do that as well as the Pharisees.

By now, you can see how all of this sounds downright impossible! So, we are to be a part of the world, and yet APART from it. We are supposed to act as purifiers, preservers, lanterns, spice to the world – and all the time keep the law passed on by Moses?! How can ANYONE do all that?!

How in the world do we become people of salt and light? It's not about DOING, it's about BEING. So that a people of salt and light, WHATEVER we do preserves and purifies and points in God's direction.

So, how do we become people of light and salt? By letting God fill our entire being, by letting God's light shine into the darkest parts of ourselves, and by letting Jesus' teachings, all he stands for, become a part of who we are.

By cultivating habits of generosity and love and honesty; and the courage to stand up for truth, integrity and love – no matter what the world might throw at us!

When all that happens, we won't have to DO anything. We won't be able to HELP but be light and salt in a dark and anxious world, whether we realize it or not!

We don't salt our food much anymore to preserve or keep it fresh. We don't usually put salt in our wounds (at least literally) to purify or disinfect them. But we still use salt to spice things up!

And we do have to be salt and light in the world RIGHT NOW if we want to be people of the WAY, for Christ's sake! Amen.