

Text: Matt 5:13-20

Jesus looked out on the crowd of disciples that had gathered around him; he knew who they were, because he had grown up there. They were Galileans. They were rough people: fishermen; a few tax collectors. They weren't educated like the Pharisees; they weren't sophisticated city folk. And they weren't particularly special in any way—they were fearful, they were selfish, they were squabblers, concerned to each get their fair share: they were ordinary people. The only thing different distinguishing them from anyone else in Galilee was that they were there with Jesus, instead of somewhere else. Some of them had in fact left everything to follow him, because Jesus had asked them to. Others were there because they had experienced healing. For different reasons, they were attracted to him.

We heard a few weeks ago, (in the Beatitudes) how Jesus had blessed them. He had said: “Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who mourn. Blessed are you who hunger.” They were poor, mourning, hungry people probably for all kinds of reasons: they were an occupied nation, under the political power of the Romans; and in any poor nation, there is a lot of death and hunger.

But he goes on. Jesus says: YOU meaning the group of them, the group that came to be with him

YOU ARE is the present tense, not: you will be in a few years, not: you will be when you die and go to heaven, not: you will be if you listen up and take up a disciplined life and do exactly what I say....no, he said YOU ARE

YOU ARE SALT. Salt preserves its surroundings. Salt cleanses wounds. Salt brings savor. Salt *lives up* its context. Salt dissolves easily into other substances and becomes invisible, yet makes a difference. Salt is necessary for life.

YOU ARE LIGHT. You as a group, not you as individuals, not like stars in the night sky, not each in your small corner, but you as a gathered community that is struggling to love one another, you are like a city on a hill; you will show the way

TO THE WORLD—your salt is not just to preserve yourselves, your light is not just for your own sense of well being. Your light is for the whole world—the whole created earth, indiscriminately.

How can this be? a group of back-water Galileans, no education, no power, no particular virtue, be called the light of the world, the salt of the earth. How could Jesus say that? What did he see?

In order to answer that, I think we have to backtrack and find out how he can call them blessed

even when they are so downtrodden and have such difficult lives.

The idea that one could know blessedness even amidst poverty grew out of Israel's history: they started as slaves; they wandered through the desert, completely dependent upon God; while they had a brief period of prosperity under their early kings, it didn't last long; soon they were captives again, living in a foreign land, or in an occupied land. As a people they never expected to be among the powerful of the world. Following God in the midst of trying circumstances was made possible only by the gift of the spirit, the gift of faith. Economic poverty in itself is no blessing in itself. Nor is weakness and powerlessness a virtue in itself. But those who know their need, and find God present in their neediness, and learn to trust, are blessed. Poverty can become blessing through an event of the Spirit.

That is what makes them salt and light.

They probably don't feel like salt and light.

But standing in the presence of Jesus calls forth a kind of humility and awe that makes these ordinary people "salt" to the world. They become different.

Since Jesus said to those disciples back then "You are the salt of the earth" I imagine he would say the same thing if he were standing here, among us, the people of MacNab, that we too are the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. Jesus stands among us and says so.

If being Salt/light has something to do with how we hold our "poverty", let's talk a little about poverty. There are lots of ways to be poor. I am going to try to name some ways in which we might be poor. See if it describes us in any way.

One of the ways human beings are poor is our fear. There are lots of things that can make us afraid: some of us are ILL, maybe some of us, feeling our age, wonder if our lives are still of value; if we are going to become a burden; maybe we are afraid of pain, and being forgotten. Maybe there will be no spaces in good nursing homes when the time comes for us. Maybe we lie awake at night worrying--about our children, about our jobs, our responsibilities, whether we are going to make it; how we are going to make it.

I suspect that we too are a MOURNING people: we have many losses—

I suspect that we too are a hungry people: maybe not physically; but maybe in other ways? not very happy? depressed? Anxious? Looking for something to make us feel better?

And we also know that we are a sinful people: we have hurt and damaged others; we have turned people away from the very God we profess to believe in; we have slipped into temptation; we have fallen low; SO we know we are needy; we can't make life on our own.

That's at least part of why we are here—because we hunger and thirst for God to enter our lives and be present in real ways; we long for light and salt— we long to be set free to live joyfully with

others, a longing has been planted in us that we cannot ignore, and so we come to this time and place to be fed.

AND JESUS KNOWS ALL THIS AND SAYS to us gathered here today

YOU as a group, as a gathered community

ARE—not will be, not might be, if you're really good and work hard, but YOU ARE

SALT—you cleanse and preserve and bring savor to the world

YOU ARE LIGHT: you shine, you show a way, you light a path

YOU ARE SALT AND LIGHT TO THE WORLD—people see what you do, and they see God.

We are salt and light because we have taken a few steps *towards rather than away* from God, and in those steps, however many they are, something happens to us. We begin to become what we seek and what we love.

Something begins its work in us: a slow work of transformation. We can't help but begin to be transformed as we come to know God.

Jesus INVITES US TO CONTINUE on the way that we have entered, ENCOURAGING us to persist and persevere;

He CHALLENGES and PROD us to keep going

to keep looking for what is good,

and hold on for dear life

until we taste, again, that God is good, and we can respond with joy.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

By (Rev) Cathy Stewart