

Salt

I have two stories for you. The first occurred in Washington D.C. during last year's Holy Week. A group of Christians got together, priests and lay folk, and decided to show solidarity with those who have no homes.

They spent Holy Week outside, with the homeless folk. On the third night, the weather turned especially rainy and cold. It was around 1 a.m.

Looking for shelter, they came upon a church holding an all night vigil, in preparation for the coming Easter. "Perfect!" they thought. "A place where we can all go in to pray, and get warm."

Leading the group to the entrance of the church was a well-known Episcopal priest. A security guard was at the front door of the church.

The priest explained that they were cold and wet, that they were looking for a place to pray and get warm.

The priest forgot that his wet, matted hair and three day old clothes made him look just like many others without homes, living on the streets.

The security guard was polite, but firm. "I was hired to keep you homeless people out of here. So, move it along, move it along."

So out they went, into the cold, into the wet. The prayer vigil inside the church continued, uninterrupted.

When we hear the passionate call of Isaiah that faith in God is made real by sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into our homes, covering the naked, welcoming our

neighbor, it's not hard to see how much work we modern Christians have to do.

I have no doubt that those men and women praying all night long at the Holy Week vigil were sincere and devoted to their faith. But sincerity and devotion are, according to Isaiah, according to Jesus, simply not enough.

And not only not enough.

A faith that excludes the outcast, the poor, the smelly, or the culturally unacceptable is not only "not enough", it is, according to our Lord, a fraud. It is false. It is empty.

Hold on to that for a minute, here, in your right hand. Hold on while we consider this.

Jesus today gives to you, to me, supreme complements. We, his disciples, are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. Take hold of that, for a moment, in your left hand. Hold it, look at it, feel it.

Salt is necessary for life. Without salt, we die.

Salt is a miracle substance. It brings taste out of what was bland, what was tasteless. It preserves.

And, it is edgy, as anyone who has heard, or used, salty language knows!

Into our bland world of 9 to 5 jobs, of anxiety and fear and insecurity, we are given the great and royal task of salting it all with the good news that, despite all appearances, God is with us.

In a world made flat by those who claim reality is limited to what we can see, touch, taste, feel and smell, we bring the astonishing news that the veil separating heaven and earth has grown thin.

That in the end, all shall be well.

That God is.

Sprinkle that salt on someone, or a dozen someone's, this week, and see what happens!

When Jesus says we have to be better than the scribes and Pharisees, meaning the religious professionals (like yours truly!) he's reaching all the way back, to the very purpose of Israel becoming the chosen people.

He is reaching back to God's intention in calling a people, and intending them to be a nation of priests, a sign to the world.

But a sign pointing to WHAT?!

Israel was chosen to be a nation of priests to show the world how God intends all human beings to live. And while these days, when we think of the Jewish Law, we often think of homosexuality or issues involving private moral choices, the real thrust of the Law was to create a just society.

Widows and orphans and illegal immigrants are to be cared for.

Interest is forbidden to be charged on loans. Fields are to be left fallow every seven years, and the poor have the right to whatever grows on them.

Every fifty years, all debt is cancelled, all land is returned to its original caretaker (notice "caretaker" and not "owner" because God owns the world!).

The Law envisions a society of equality, of the fair distribution of wealth, of caring for one another. But the Law instead became the playground of loopholes for those looking for loopholes.

It was twisted to justify exclusion, to classify, to demonize rather than to include, to welcome, to embrace. Only by returning to the original vision of the Law can you and I do better than the scribes, better than the Pharisees. And Jesus shows us how.

Jesus, intent on getting back to the original vision of the Law, calls his society together, he brings us close, and explains. He is creating a society that the world has never seen before. What the Law couldn't create, his grace will create.

To you, salt, to you, light, Jesus gives us a new way to deal with offenders: forgive them.

Jesus gives us a new way to deal with violence: we suffer it. Jesus gives us a new way to deal with money: we share it. He gives us a new way to deal with leadership: we draw on the gifts of every member, even the most humble. Hauerhaus

This new society created by Jesus, what we call the church, it doesn't exist to ensure its own survival. The church exists as a sign to the world of what the world can and will look like when we Christians *choose to become salty again; when we lighten up and shine!*

If we sometimes feel that God is silent, that God has abandoned us, it is, as Meister Eckhart says, not God who has wandered away from us, but we who have walked away from God.

But if we go back, to that spot on the path where we left him, if we become salty once again:

“Then our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up quickly; our vindicator shall go before us, the glory of the LORD shall be our rear guard. Then we shall call, and the LORD will answer; we shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”

Which brings me to my second story for you. The Taize community is a group of monks in Paris. They pray and leave their doors open for anyone who wishes to join them in prayer. 24 hours a day, in downtown Paris.

One day, a deranged man came into the monastery and stabbed to death one of the monks.

The question facing the community after this horror, was whether they should stop welcoming visitors? Should guards be hired? Should a metal detector be installed?

The community said: “No.”

Everyone is welcome. There will be no security.

Because, they are convinced, at the heart of the gospel, God’s purpose for us is revealed in weakness, in vulnerability, in God, emptying himself, through Jesus, for us.

This is the folly of our faith. It is in this very weakness, this vulnerability, this emptying, that we claim ourselves as disciples of Jesus the Christ.

In this folly is salt.

In this folly is light.

You are the salt of the world!

You are the light of the world!

So go out, and be salty!

Go out, and shine!

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