

The God-Flavors of the Earth
Saint Mark PC
July 19, 2020

I am always moved by that translation from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. I used that as well as the next couplet of verses for my niece's wedding when she asked me to pick the scriptures. This image of salt and light will be the topic of this week and next week's message.

If you are not familiar by the way with this Message translation, as I have mentioned to several of you at Saint Mark, Caroline and I were fortunate to be around this as it was happening, because in the mid 1990's Eugene Peterson was pastor in residence at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and that's when he was working on this project. He basically took the original text in New Testament Greek, and translated it for what might be a modern equivalent in contemporary language. Then he did the same for the Old testament Hebrew.

As I put this message together this week, with all of the calamity of the spread of COVID 19, the continuing fight against racism and everything else, I was thinking about how we could be salt and light in a world of decay and darkness. Then, I was up late on Friday night when the word came around 11:30pm that John Lewis had passed. I thought, it is remarkable how descriptive this passage is of his life. So I wanted to do some thinking about his life and work for today.

Jon Meacham the historian, as some of you know, is writing a book about him, and he was called upon shortly after John Lewis died to share his thoughts:

"Not only was he called the Conscience of congress but he was a Transcendent figure - a genuine saint, not a stained-glass figure - but a human being willing to

suffer and to die for his understanding of the gospel and how that gospel found expression in America of the 20th and 21st centuries."

The Jon Meacham took it a step further - John Lewis he said was about the beatitudes:

Blessed are the meek, those who are persecuted for righteousness

About reversal - being kind not cruel, generous not greedy

About Love as an ideal being not as significant as love as a reality

Then Meacham really caught my attention, "More important than civil rights it is about the American character and it's about the Christian story overall." Saying that John Lewis was all about the Christian story, the Beatitudes, brings us right back to where our one verse of Matthew's gospel is located today.

It brings us back to this part of the Sermon on the Mount which in my view empowers us to be a positive force for good, a people who offer hope and promise for the future because of what God has already done for all.

The theologian Augustine said all the way back in the 5th century something which seems to be very modern when he said, "What humanity builds, humanity destroys. SO let us be about building the kingdom of God."

These two simple sounding instructions that Jesus gave to his people - as part of the Sermon on the Mount - to be SALT and LIGHT in a world of decay and darkness. This week we'll look at the first part of that.

As Peterson phrased it - to be salt seasoning which brings out the God flavors of the earth.

I suppose we all have heard that expression at some point. Jesus said you are the salt of the earth. Now in ordinary times, in our interest in good health and concern about diet and blood pressure, we are told to be careful about salt. Maybe even avoid it. So we may miss the subtlety of the image, "You are the salt of the earth."

But I don't think anyone in the early church would have missed it. For saying you are the salt of the earth was a great compliment, one of the best you could receive. In the ancient world, salt was as valuable commodity as there was.

We even know that salt was used partly as a currency for some, as we use money today. Salt was a means of payment for some in the Roman army. In Latin it was called Solarium, or literally salt money. I am pretty sure that is where our word Salary comes from.

You might also have heard the expression "Is he or she worth their salt?" That also comes right out of the ancient world - is a person worth the salt that they are being paid?

Today let me ask you to think about three characteristics of salt which may help us in this time of difficulty be the salt of the earth. Think of it as being sprinkled all over our area and beyond to be God's ambassadors in a tough time.

FIRST, Salt was and is a preservative. We know in ancient times before refrigeration and easy access to fresh meat in grocery stores, things we at least used to take for granted, salt was used to preserve meat and other foods, to keep them from decay.

Thinking again about John Lewis. I was briefly involved with The Faith and Politics Institute in Washington when I worked for CHPC two years ago. They have done a

great amount of anti-racism work that is faith based. I was fortunate enough to be there when FPI honored the survivors of the South Carolina Emmanuel church shooting on the one-year anniversary of the tragedy there. They held this event in the auditorium of the US Capitol, and it was called Truth Reconciliation and Healing - and the program first showed a video of many local and national leaders making what they called a pilgrimage to South Carolina to understand more deeply the situation and meet the families involved. And of course, you know who led that pilgrimage - John Lewis.

Afterwards, a South Carolina senator (Scott) spoke to share his thoughts and a South Carolina congressman (Clyburn) spoke. One from each side of the aisle so to speak. They spoke well of increasing understanding and dialogue among leaders, and us all. And then, we heard from the victim's families. Instead of anger or revenge, over and over, they emphasized the message of forgiveness and reconciliation. It was their faith they said, which taught them the power of forgiveness. It did not mean that they had forgotten justice. It meant, as Alana Simmons said, that if you hold anger in your heart, it is like drinking poison and expecting it to harm you enemy, quoting from a famous ancient saying.

It was a powerful witness. It was a moving witness. How can we be a preservative like that? To react by building up the kingdom of God? That is a legacy which is left to us all now in the fight against racism, along with many other things.

(I still recall one of the speakers from that night later introduced a practical thought. He and another fellow senator call it "Solution Sundays". The premise is very basic - commit one Sunday to having a lunch or dinner with a person of another race or culture in your home. Because you can build trust, reconciliation, they said, by getting to know one another, in a way

that is much deeper than sitting next to someone at a conference.)

Regardless of where each of us might be on the political spectrum, breaking down walls, and building trust would seem just like what the salt of the earth might do.

Jesus said, you are the salt of the earth - you are to be a preservative in a world of decay.

The second characteristic of salt is that salt was and is a seasoning. I will go out on a limb and say in Jesus day, food was bland compared to what we enjoy. So they needed a little seasoning to spice things up. Salt's real function is to bring out the flavors in something, not call attention to itself, but to lift some other aspect up. You can bring out the true flavors of what you are tasting - meat, vegetables, and so forth.

This is where Eugene Petersons translation of Mt 5:13 just speaks to my heart. Again,

"You're here to be salt seasoning that brings out the God flavors of this earth."

You and I are sprinkled over the area to season life, to bring out the true God flavors of the people around us. Maybe we are called to season our environment, to make life more palatable for someone. Maybe you are called to be a peacemaker, or to speak truth when we see an obvious falsehood, which seems a daily occurrence now.

When we see our friends and neighbors weighed down by the calamity of the virus, a word of optimism, hope and cheer can be so welcome.

I can't think of salt without thinking of my own mother. She was one of those who would salt everything until it was crunchy. Do you know anyone like that? I

think I take after her in that way. Nobody wanted to tell her it wasn't good for her, and she lived a long life in spite of that.

But she was just like that in life too. One of those people who had the ability not to call attention to herself, but to season everything with a word of optimism, hope and cheer. Do you know people like that? According to Jesus, They are the salt of the earth.

The third aspect of salt is that salt is a healing agent.

In ancient times of course we did not have medical infrastructure like we do today. No real hospitals, pharmacies, as we know them.

When someone would get an injury or wound they would immediately get out the salt water - ouch that would sting a little. But there was a cleansing property that allows healing. Even some docs today will have us gargle with salt water for a sore throat.

We know that God calls each of us to be a healing agent, to be a force for good - to allow people to experience the grace and the healing power of God.

As followers of Jesus, we need to be about building the kingdom of God.

One more John Lewis reflection - when he led the pilgrimage to South Carolina, he told a story of a man who had beaten him some 50 years earlier at a protest.

The congressman recalled how this man and one of his assailants came to his office in Washington, D.C., several years ago with his son and apologized, asking for forgiveness.

"Lewis said, 'I accept your apology. I forgive you. They hugged me, I hugged them back, and the three of us cried together'".

When he told this story in South Carolina, he said:

"When people tell me nothing has changed in America, I will say ... come and walk in our shoes. This state is a different state. It is a better state. My native state of Alabama is a better place. Our country is a better place.

Lewis said the nation must "build on this sense of hope and progress and continue to move toward reconciliation and lay down the burden of bitterness, the burden of division and the burden of hate, and bring people together."

Like Jon Meacham says, it's all about the beatitudes.

As followers of Jesus,
You are a preservative in a world of decay.

You are the salt seasoning that brings out the god-
flavors of the earth

You are an agent of reconciliation and healing in a
wounded world.

So let's continue to be about building the kingdom of
God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.