

“You are the salt of the earth.”

Let me tell you a story: Back in the dark ages, I was tending bar at a joint that served Seattle’s fishing fleet. And that’s where I met Einar Pedersen¹. Part of the year he long-lined for lingcod and sable fish, mostly up around Yakutat, Alaska, and then part of the year he re-rigged his boat for pink shrimp down on the Oregon Coast. Einar had a couple of years of technical college and an associate of arts degree in small engine repair.

As soon as you were introduced to Einar, he considered you a friend, and there wasn’t much he wouldn’t do for his friends. One fall, when I came down with a seriously mean-spirited flu, Einar brought over the first VCR I had ever seen and a box of tapes. He hooked up the VCR, put some fish in the fridge, *did my dishes* and then left for a few weeks up to catch the end of the sable fish season at Cook Inlet.

Einar was just a basically good guy; a regular, down-to-earth guy. Reliable and trustworthy. He talked incessantly, but Einar treated everyone he met with respect. There’s no question: we could use more like him, especially now. Einar was one of those people that many of us think of when we hear the phrase “salt of the earth.” But have you ever wondered what that phrase means?

In this Gospel reading, Matthew’s Jesus is talking to his disciples, many of them also fishermen. Jesus tells these disciples that they are the “salt of the earth.” Now, given some of people that were in that group, Jesus can’t mean that they are all like Einar. There may have been a few people who were gentle, giving folk – Andrew, maybe, Philip or Bartholomew?

But then there’s Judas, who will later betray his teacher. And Peter who will deny Jesus three times in his hour of need. Or Matthew, the tax collector, who had until just recently been extracting money from his neighbors for the Roman Empire.

How about James and John bar-Zebedee, the Sons of Thunder? A couple of aggressive and insensitive goons who never saw a fight they didn’t want to join or start. They were “salt of the earth?” Not much like Einar, most of these guys. Jesus *must* mean something else.

This is a continuation of the reading we heard last week – Matthew’s Beatitudes – where Jesus made a stunning declaration: “You are *now* blessed.” The beatitudes are not entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven, but descriptions of God’s heaven that is both here at hand and yet to come. God has already blessed us, making God’s heaven available to our awareness.

Jesus goes on to tell this same motley bunch: “You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.” This is not a prediction or a promise that his followers would *become* salt and light. He could have said, “If you want to be salt and light, do this....” Or, “If you do these things, someday I will call you

¹ Name changed to protect the ridiculously decent...but the story is true.

salt and light.” Instead, Jesus just declared it straight out – you, my followers, *are* the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The people that Jesus commended this way were all kinds of folks, with all kinds of temperaments and backgrounds. There were a few confused fishermen, tax collectors and a handful of other men all immature in their new roles as the Twelve. But there was also a crowd behind them, all listening to Jesus. Men and women, mostly Jews, some of whom had disagreements with Jesus and with each other. Some Gentiles were also there.

To this point, the apostles had done nothing to distinguish themselves from the crowd and none of them had done anything to earn the title. But there it was. To these people, Jesus said “You are, *right now*, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

As different as they all may be, they do share one thing in common. They are blessed by God. Now.

Jesus used *two* words in commissioning these folks. From Matthew’s Greek manuscript, we translate one word, “Kosmos,” as “world.” The other we translate as “earth.” But something got lost. Jesus is referring here to something that would have been obvious to his Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking listeners. There is no Greek word for this reference, but it is still obvious to Palestinian Christians today.

You see, as you drive from Jerusalem toward Jericho and into the Jordan Valley, you start noticing mounds beside houses or encampments in some of the less settled areas. These mounds are clay-ovens that are fueled by dried donkey, goat and camel dung. People here use clay-ovens like the one pictured on your bulletin to bake bread as they have done since ancient days. In the Aramaic and Hebrew languages that Jesus spoke, the word that names this kind of bread-baking clay-oven is exactly the same word for “earth.”

During Jesus’ lifetime, each village had a common clay-oven, and each oven had a slab of salt at the bottom. People piled dried dung that had also been mixed with salt on top of the slab because the salt, you see, the salt has properties that help the dung to burn. Over extended use, the plates lose their ability to catalyze and, consequently, become useless and need to be replaced.

Jesus’ reference to salt has nothing to do with flavor and everything to do with essence—specifically, with salt’s natural ability to help make and maintain life-sustaining fire. You can hear now, what Jesus means: “You are the salt that makes the clay-oven work.”

That is to say, regardless of whether your temperament is more like Einar’s or more like the Sons of Thunder, you have been blessed by God. And because you have been made aware of God’s in-breaking heaven, you are now able to help God’s out-pouring of life and light. You can be helpfully mixed into the sometimes aromatic, organic material that naturally results from life processes – elements that may seem off-putting or useless to some. With your awareness of what God’s heaven is like, your presence in the mix participates in God’s yearning to make that pile of waste not only useful, but life-sustaining.

Now, if we lose our saltiness, our essence, that is, as carriers of God's grace, we become useless as agents of the inbreaking of God's heaven, But, notice: we are then called the "least" in heaven, we are not excluded. Our spiritual practices of prayer, the Holy Eucharist, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God – our spiritual practices are what keep us in right relationship.

Our spiritual practices nurture a right relationship that exceeds any hide-bound adherence to rules or self-importance that restricts the flow of heaven. As we practice right relationship with God and each other, we experience righteousness that surpasses our self-delusions. Through right-relationship, God sets us free from the impulse to perpetuate religious *form* at the expense of consenting to God's transfiguring *love*.

In much the same way, we radiate the light of the Kosmos. Because we have been blessed, we do justice on behalf of God's creation, Because God has named us as God's own, we temper our actions with God's loving mercy. Because we are sisters and brothers of the Son of God, who is the Giver of Light, we walk humbly with our God.

Doing what God asks of us is participating in God's outpouring of heaven. It matters.

You and I are not the Light itself, not by ourselves, at any rate. But each of us and all of us radiate the one Light of God. Imagine each of us as lightbulbs made of similar but slightly different materials. Within each light bulb is a unique filament. Some bulbs produce light that is more pink, others more blue, some more red and some more green. There are even bulbs that radiate ultraviolet or infrared light that the human eye cannot see. And suffusing all of creation is the entire spectrum of God's light.

You and I, you see, are not the light. But without us, part of God's light goes unseen. Doing what God asks of us allows God to shine through us and through our actions.

We differ in many ways, but each of us can consent to let God's light and love radiate through whatever vessel we are right now. Whether we are gentle by nature or more prickly in temperament, we can inspire people with God's life-giving fire. Whether we are a 15-watt bulb or a carbon arc light, together we can join God to reveal new ways to perceive God's astonishing Kosmos.

Why hide the light given to us? God has chosen you and I, and the crowd standing around us. God has named us to be salt and light.

Why not become a pillar of God's fire?

Works consulted:

Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995.