

# “Pass The Salt, Please!”

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers, presented Feb. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 5:13-20

One could reasonably, in these troubling days, observe "an excessive desire for safety" to an already too long list of anxieties. The recent attack at a Muslim mosque in suburban Quebec City last week only moves our anxiety quotation to a new level. American President Donald Trump compounds the problem by using this human tragedy to justify the building of a wall to keep undesirables out of his country. But the wall has already been built. We have allowed ourselves to build a wall of fear, false security around our private and even public lives, making us afraid of one another; and of that "stranger" that God loves and bids us welcome into our lives. How can we "be a light in such a contentious world? Poet Madeleine L'Engle's approaches the issue by drawing on Jesus' own words here: "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

Indeed when we hear Jesus using such simple images as salt and light, we wonder how Christians today find themselves so divided on issues of justice, sharing, and the protection of vulnerable people. We can hardly shine for the rest of the world, if we are not more united as followers of Jesus. There are many places of light even in these days: I notice, for example, that many of my friends (sadly de-churched) find hope in the words and deeds of the current Pope, Francis, who prioritizes marginalized people.

Alas, the church, especially in mainline Protestantism like ourselves, has been challenged for some time, long before we found ourselves in today's quandaries – economic, political and most of all, competing theological principles. Gifted preacher Thomas Long's description fits us well even more today than in the past: "We are overpowered, outnumbered, and often overlooked." Today, a growing number of people call themselves "nones," (non-Christian, non-churchgoers, non-believers) and a large percentage of those who claim church membership rarely attend services. Most troubling is that people of faith and the church itself are often seen as obstructions to what is best for the world: we're often seen as irrelevant, or worse, as judgmental, hypocritical and even arrogant. We're seen as *blocking* the light!

It may make us uncomfortable to take stock of our shared life as communities of faith, and to "repent" – we use that word a lot in the church, but what if we heard this week's reading from Isaiah as a kind of "examination of conscience," exhorting us not to focus on our religious traditions "fasts," our "sackcloth and ashes," but to turn our sights, to "see" and "notice" what really matters to God: how we live in peace and justice with one another, doing what Jesus announced as his own mission, to "let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke." The prophet exhorts us to turn away from violence, to share from our abundance with those who are hungry, homeless, naked, then goes on about our ruins being rebuilt, our bones strengthened, our breaches repaired, our streets restored, and even we ourselves will become like well-watered gardens, laying the foundations for generations to come. Could there be a more beautiful hope for us, and for the world? These are *words of hope when we feel small and powerless*.

Those words of Isaiah, paired with Jesus' own teaching about salt and light, provide the basics for any church, large or small, vital or besieged. I agree, our way of life may indeed be an "...alternative one in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands us..." Fulfilling Jesus' commands is difficult, not "...just for a day, but being faithful day after day, maintaining confidence in what, for all the world, appears to be a losing cause. Our calling isn't about institutional survival, but something much greater; Jesus is saying that what the people of God do in the world really counts..." says Long.

We need to refocus. We need to read these clear and simple words from Jesus - including his words about true righteousness and fulfilling the ancient commandments, along with the passage from Isaiah so that we, too, in our time, might be salt and light for the world. Indeed, when people encounter us – as individuals and as communities of faith, they should see and sense *more*: they should *feel* hope, they should *feel* the possibility of a "different world, marked by unheard-of reconciliation, simple truth-telling, outrageous generosity, and love of one's enemies". We might reflect on "whether the life of [our] congregation is actually a model or simply a mirror of old values and behaviors."

If we are salt, then we won't just find comfort and assurance in *being* something but will find our purpose and identity in participating in the *doing* of something significant, and that something will work a difference in the world around us rather than simply conform us to the values of the culture that surrounds us. "Any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive calling is forgotten has rendered itself useless," one critic writes. And if we are to "be" light, it is really God's light that is shining through us, for we are "not the light itself but only the window through which the light is to be seen," as we do the works of healing, justice, and mercy that are "indelibly etched pictures of God's love." That, is beauty restored, as God wills it.

One thing is clear: The church is no secret society. Jesus tells us, right from the beginning. We are challenged, "called" to go public with all of this, as public as a city on a hill....God speaks to the church saying: "Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep an open house (and mind and heart), be generous with your lives." As we strive to live faithfully in the world, we may be small, but we are mighty, not because of our own strength but because of God's own grace, which will never leave us on our own. Christian writer Anne Lamott says, "The thing about light is that it really isn't yours; it's what you gather and shine back. And it gets more power from reflectiveness; if you sit still and take it in, it fills your cup, and then you can give it off yourself." And further: "Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there and shine."