

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

February 6, 2011

The Rev. Catherine Powell

Scripture: Matthew 5 :13 16 “You are the salt of the earth.”

Jesus tells us today to be “salt for the earth.” We are all careful nowadays about salt in our diets, but if we use just the right amount, salt adds so much flavor. A baked potato plain is fine—but add a little salt and it’s delicious. Soups labeled with “healthy low sodium” may be good, but a little salt adds so much—it brings out the flavor in other foods. We value salt mainly for it can do for the flavor of our food, but in earlier times salt was valued for a range of things; it cleansed, it preserved, it healed, it *fought* for the good. The flavor that it added to food was just another sign of its potent life-enhancing qualities.

Jesus pairs his words about salt with words about light. “You are light for the world.” Light has many positive qualities, and one of them is that it—like salt—makes things come alive. Think of a dimly lit room when suddenly a ray of light hits a formerly gray-looking wall—and a painting jumps to life. Bright colors leap out. There is richness, shape, contrast, zip—life.

Jesus says, “You are to be salt. You are to be light.” We are to be ones who give life its savor, its vitality, its bright colors. We are to make the bland and the hidden come alive. And Jesus showed us how.

Jesus stepped outside of constricting social norms. He talked to people who were socially invisible and made them vivid: women, foreigners, children. These groups stayed quietly in the gray background of Jewish first century life. But then he veered off script and people who had been dull nobodies became fascinating, problematic, inspirational. And Jesus did other surprising things. He didn’t wait for the “right time” to act. He healed people on the Sabbath. He plucked up corn right out of the field and rubbed it with his hands—working on an official non-work day. And on official *work* days, he invited himself to dinner parties! And on the Passover weekend when the Roman governor was parading into the capital city on a great war horse or the like, surrounded by banners and soldiers, Jesus was riding in on a half-grown ass through a rag-tag crowd. He surprised people, he woke people up. He made them look. He made them laugh or frown or ask “what?” and “who?” and “why?”

Church of the Servant already knows something about the salty life. Surprise, humor, fresh approaches, and creative characters have been part of our life for a long time. At an Epiphany service we might jump up and dance, to a hymn tune no less. In late May you might catch us wearing goofy lobster hats. We entrust a serious churchy job—the presentation of the bread and wine for the Eucharist—to children. Shorts and flip-flops mix with suits and scarves, and people knit sweaters during the sermon. Zing. Zip. What? Surprise!

Walter Brueggemann, the contemporary biblical scholar, interprets the world through the eyes of the Old Testament story-tellers. They understood that networks of social and political forces work to keep people asleep, to keep life dull, to keep us enslaved, and even to make us enslavers of others. But God’s salty people have always resisted. Moses led the resistance to the Pharaoh’s building projects. The prophets spoke up to the great Babylonian empire: “You may have culture; you may have great hanging gardens; but you don’t have our hearts. We’re going home.” And Jesus spoke out to Rome and to the parts of the religious system that were stultifying.

When we live as “salty people” we are participating in reclaiming the world. People who were formerly invisible are proclaimed visible and even vivid. People who are supposed to be powerless and dull become powerful—by banding together, by acting, by laughing, and singing, behaving in surprising ways that represent God’s point-of-view.

Salty people act and take the risk of becoming visible. Salty people dream big because they refuse to understand that they are supposed to accept society’s prescribed limits. If we—as a church community-- want to take our salty life a bit farther, let’s keep questioning and laughing. Let’s dream some outrageous dreams. Now, we’re just back from diocesan convention, and I won’t say that there were boring moments—but I did have some chance to think up some pretty grand scenarios to take our saltiness out into the world. Here’s one. We plow up a couple of large garden plots and plant an organic vegetable garden. We ask if some of the Burmese refugees from IRM will help us with it, maybe direct it in fact. (Agriculture is Burma’s primary industry.) Then we give them all the produce to eat or sell. Maybe we could invite the school children over to see how fruits and vegetables actually grow on real plants.

Here’s another. We buy some apartments—How about The Lofts just across the street? We use one as a campus ministry center, a place where students can come for support and advice and friendship. We offer counseling on student issues like bullying, loneliness, suicide. We use another apartment as a home for a caretaker—someone who otherwise wouldn’t have a job. We buy a few more for people we meet through WIHN-- maybe one of those can be that caretaker. In a few more apartments we start an intentional community for 5 or 10 or 50 college students who will live and pray and do service projects—like tutoring at College Park--together.

Or this one. We enlarge our kitchen. We offer a big free pancake supper not just Shrove Tuesday but *every* Tuesday for hungry and lonely college students-- and maybe for anyone else who is hungry. The refugees who are caring for our garden can come in and eat too, and meet the students. And we can start a job-training program, training some out-of-work people to be cooks and kitchen managers using our great new kitchen and free meals program.

Salt. Zing. Zip. Vision. Dreams. Challenging all that wants to make life drudgery, all that wants to make life dull, all that traps human beings into prescribed slots and boring plotlines, challenging whatever kills hope. Let’s keep our vision lively. Let’s try things. Let’s offer laughter instead of fear. Maybe it doesn’t sound quite right but—wouldn’t it be great if we became, together, a great big old salt lick?