

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
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Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Red Hot Chili Peppers

After Jesus lifts up the beautiful words of blessing found in the Beatitudes, he issues a directive to disciples, a kind of identity statement: “You are salt” he says. “You are light.” Be these things in the world.

But we, perhaps, have an interpretation problem. See, we have this saying – you know how we say he or she is the “salt of the earth” -- a particular designation for people we regard as especially good. While not exactly completely off the mark, this well known saying kind of skews things, makes it harder for us to appreciate how people in Jesus day, and in the early church, would have heard the phrase. Commentators tell us we can catch its force by substituting another seasoning, imagining Jesus saying to his followers not you are salt but “You are the red hot pepper for the whole world” which, for today, I have expanded to “you are the red hot chili pepper for the whole world” --for no particular reason than it seemed fun, and maybe well, a better sermon title.

To say we are salt, or chili pepper, though is to say something about how we change, effect, or flavor the world. It is not so much about status (Jesus telling his disciples they are the world’s ethical elite) as it is about *function* “You must *add zest* to the life of the world.” (Interpretation Commentary, *Matthew*, Douglas Hare, p. 44)
It’s a good scripture for seniors about to embark on a new chapter of life. It’s a good scripture for a church wanting to contemplate its vision. There is no mistaking red hot chili pepper when you taste it. It’s *distinctive*.

When I was young, maybe just 13, I was introduced to religion that was very different from what I had grown up with. A cousin of mine took me to her Baptist bible camp, where I met people who were born again. These people had, it seemed to me, a rather narrow way of understanding what it was to follow Jesus. There was a kind of test proof – that is, did you testify, did you witness – that is to say, would you go out in a public place and try, by your words, to bring others to Jesus?
I think it’s funny that I became a minister, really, having been introduced to that kind of pressure! I found the whole idea petrifying and thanked God that I did not

live up in Southern Ontario, where this camp was, and where these new religious friends would be checking on me. Their way of being religious made me think of God up in the sky, standing there with a checklist. And how many people did you win for Jesus today?

I am grateful that my life has unfolded in ways that lead me to believe that we can love Jesus and let the opportunities to love Jesus present themselves as we live our lives. I no longer think of that as weak, or cowardly, as if truly vigorous Christians are only those who will witness in public places with tracts in hand. In fact, I think the let it unfold way is so much more gospel, and so much more compelling.

This week we had yet another funeral, this one for Gerry Allen, who was a member of this church for many years. Not all of you knew Gerry, she was in her nineties and getting quite frail in these last few years, so she wasn't in church very much. Her brother gave her eulogy, and though I always thought of Gerry as a loving person, her brother, in his words, helped me truly *see* it. Gerry's brother spoke of how growing up, they had a sister, Catherine I think her name was, who was quite disabled. Gerry took this younger sister under her wing: standing up for her in school, being like a second mom to her, helping her in lots of ways. Many years later, when this sister, now a grown women, was dying, Gerry, sensing she needed human warmth and touch, crawled into bed with her, holding her until she died. Isn't that, her brother asked, what we mean by love? Gerry's brother helped us see -- see love, and see Jesus life made manifest in Gerry's life which is really what Jesus is talking about in our scripture lesson today.

Jesus is talking about visible faith, about love of God that is able to be seen. And the great thing about it is, it doesn't look just the same in any one of us.

I think once again of the man from Crystal Gardens who spoke recently at the Women's Guild, and his great delight in the variety of beautiful plants and flowers he displayed. "All this variety, all this color, tells me that God doesn't want us to live bland or boring lives" he said. I think of my husband and his basement full of rocks. Rocks with names like kaleidoscope jasper, a rock that dazzles with blues and grays and golds, and laboradorite, a rock that seems to have light shining deep within it. The plants and the rocks remind me that we do not all add zest or interest to the world in the same way, nor are we expected to, for God loves all that variety --- as Shug says in the Color Purple, God *takes pleasure* in it. I think of our time and talent auction this past Friday night, and people giving what they had to give – some gifts of quilting or knitting or cooking, a visible myriad of gift offerings from this very congregation and all of it good.

I am so grateful that my religious journey has led me to an understanding of a greater variety of ways of practicing faith, and showing love. I am so glad to see it more now as a matter of discovery— that as we live out our lives, we are naturally led into opportunities where we discover ways Jesus light can shine in us. Be light, Jesus says, and don't hide your light -- for I am counting on you to reflect *my* light, to

make it shine forth in this world. It's not *not* about words, about verbally sharing what we believe, but for sure it isn't *all* about words.

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all the house." The words about not hiding your light are included, of course, because in Jesus day, and in the early church's day, it was tempting to hide your faith, because following Jesus could get you in trouble. It could get you persecuted. It could get you killed. Today, in practicing our faith, we may be tempted to hide our light not so much for fear for our lives as for the opinions of others. You know...if people know we are religious, if they know we are trying to follow Jesus, won't they think we are nut cases like so many others who claim that too? Won't they make assumptions about us that we clearly wouldn't want? But Jesus didn't say "if some of my followers are an irritant to you, practice your faith, but do it very quietly." He said be salt, be light. These are bold things, salt and light, and they aren't qualified by words about self-preservation or reputation.

Liam, Genevieve, Julia, Samantha, Jimmy, Andrew, and Mark I think of the many ways you've helped show us God's love. I think of all the zest you've added here. You've sung in choirs, sung solos, played instruments, drummed us in to Thanksgiving worship and trumpeted us into Easter joy. You've helped at Harvest Fairs and potlucks, helped with Sunday school classes, entertained us with Hats off to Music productions. You've joined in mission -- feeding hungry people, fixing up houses, singing at nursing homes, and holding a prom for people with special needs right here in our church. In so many ways you have been a part of us. You have let your light shine, and as you've done this you have brought joy and hope to this faith community. You've also challenged us – in being youth, you've challenged us not to fall upon stale and tired religious language and, in your passion for mission, you've challenged us to be the distinctive, lively church we know Jesus wants us to be.

As you go from your homes, as you move on to new places, we hope that when the world, as it sometimes does, tries to take you down a peg you will remember that Jesus says you are salt, you are red hot chili peppers, you are light. And when the world tries to tell you that everyone just wants the same thing, to be rich, to be famous, to be powerful and you should want these things too and you need to get in line, we hope you will remember that here you have a church home, and here you have been *baptized*, and therefore, we hope, awakened to an identity that is so much more than that. We hope you know you can return here anytime you need the reminder that you are precious, that you are loved, and that you have gifts to offer in Jesus name, gifts that just might change the world.

There's a final trick in our scripture lesson today—for all of us, not just for our high school seniors. We are to be red hot chili peppers in a world that is not yet. The world is not yet a place where the poor in spirit or those who mourn or those who seek peace or righteousness automatically come to know all manner of good things. Jesus wants us to *imagine* a world, and then *be* that world so as to help *bring about* that world. So we are to be distinctive and bold not primarily for ourselves, so we

feel good about ourselves but for the world -- so that with our contribution of salt, light the world becomes more fair, more loving, more whole -- a place of hope and healing.

It's a tall order, and sometimes awe inspiring. For not only does the world sorely need all these things Jesus believes we each of us can help usher in these things.

We just have to remember that deep within each one of us there is this spark, this red hot chili pepper heat where Jesus lives in us, and wants to live even more.

Amen.