

“My Fire Has Gone Out!”

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Isaiah 58:6-12 + Matthew 5:13-20 = Salt and Light

Buddy Hackett, the comedian, tells the story of how different Army life was from his sheltered Jewish upbringing. He had no idea he had been suffering constant heartburn all his life from the spicy food in his household. After three weeks of Army food he reported to the medical officer and announced to him that he was dying.

“Now what makes you think that?” the doctor asked. Buddy Hackett in anguish replied:

“My fire has gone out!”

In our text today, Jesus speaks of our fire-in-the-belly going out:

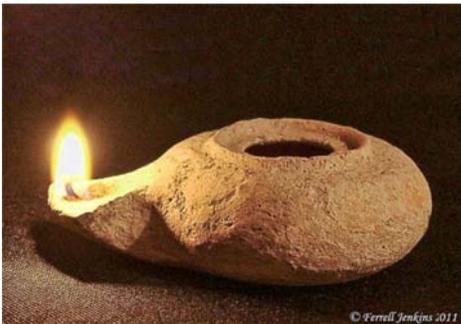
“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”

He means when the strength of our faith becomes adulterated and its purity slowly slips away, it leaves us with a “tasteless” faith. Like soda without the fizz, if our faith has been reduced to boring and lifeless, it is difficult to restore its strength.

This metaphor of the distinction of savory and bland wouldn’t normally seem of much consequence. Yet for Jesus the next boundary between light and dark is of great importance:

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory”

For Jesus this division between light and darkness is nothing less than the absolute boundary between legitimate and illegitimate, between good and evil, between kingdom living and its opposite.



Same as us, some of the folks of Jesus' day were having problems sorting out what it means to live as salt and light. Many learned leaders were engaged in interminable debates over more ephemeral issues: how to tell when Sabbath begins, how to properly fast, is it forbidden to untie a donkey on the Sabbath?



Moral concerns to be sure, but they seem to have missed the memo about the big issues: good versus evil, light versus darkness ~ the big questions with which Jesus and the Prophets were most concerned. Perhaps the fire had gone out for many of these folks, for many of us folks as well. Surely they hadn't forgotten God saying:

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house.”

The Prophets were very clear about what the LORD requires, about where the good is to be found. This from Hassidic wisdom:

A rabbi once asked his students: "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?"

Sensing that the answer was not among the obvious ones they had been taught, none of the students respond. One student breaks the uncomfortable silence, "Please tell us the answer."



"It is not when you can tell a sheep from a goat. It is not when you can tell a pear from a fig tree. It is when you can look into the face of another human being and you have enough light within yourself to recognize your brother or your sister. If you cannot recognize your sister or brother then it is night whatever the time."

That's the heart of the matter: if we fail to recognize our connection with every other human then our fire has definitely gone out, our salt has lost its savor, our lamp has been extinguished.

Is this condition terminal? Jesus seems to say so at first:

“[I]f salt has lost its taste, [i]t is no longer good for anything, but [to be] thrown out.”

Jesus seems to imply that once it is lost it may not be possible to restore our commitment to follow him.



However, Susan and I once moved into a manse and one of the Elders came around with a giant bag of LED's to replace all the tungsten bulbs ~ a generous offer. Only one problem, all the bulbs were simply too dim for practical use. For most of us, our spiritual energy is like that, not completely spent but merely of diminished capacity. Our fire hasn't gone out completely.

Then the next part of Jesus' parable gives us hope of restoration. Jesus' lamp under a bushel metaphor tells us that we can restore our lamps to their lampstands and let the illumination of our witness shine like a bright city built on a hill. Jesus longs for us to have our faith and our commitment and our fire-in-the-belly revived.

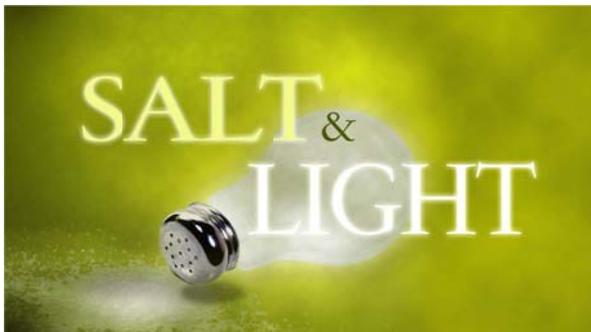


Especially on the important issues, we should apply Jesus' admonition to place our light back on its perch ~ to refocus on the issues of ultimate consequence: knowing kingdom living from the opposite, recognizing our brother or sister in the face of every person, walking God's Life Path with integrity.

Our faith journey is less the impure salt of Jesus' day, worth only to be discarded, but more like the modern salt we pour in the water softener. When our spiritual walk loses potency, Jesus is the fresh infusion of salt crystals which renews the system. Jesus is where we look for renewal of our

spiritual energy. Jesus doesn't just encourage us to relight our lamps, Jesus is always ready to help us lift our lamp back up to its post.

Please listen carefully to Jesus' words. Our purpose is not to revive ourselves. Jesus doesn't say "Become salt." Nor "Become light." Jesus begins, "You are salt. You are light." Already done! We do not need to aspire to be salt and light ~ we already are.



God is grace, and we have already experienced it. We are already blessed to be, already chosen to be Jesus' light and salt. All that follows in the Sermon on the Mount after

this constitutes concrete ways to live as light and salt, to live as God intends, to be the people of the Way.

There are certainly folks in our day too who seem stuck as well, obsessed with discussing ephemera, of splitting theological hairs *ad absurdum*. I'm sure you can think of a few less than ultimate issues in the church which are raised to prominence, yet which deplete our salt and dim our lamps ~ issues which seem so important to the protagonists but which are really tangential to God's realm: secular ideologies and corrosive conflict which invade and dilute and corrupt.

Jesus knew that our zeal would inevitably subside. Yet we can go about restoring it by first "following your bliss."

Think back to a time when you were Jesus' pure salt, perhaps the moment you answered Jesus' call, perhaps a high point of enthusiasm in your walk with Jesus. What was the touchstone for that in your life? What experiences accompanied that bliss? Put yourself back there, relive it. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you again to that spiritual highpoint, recover its joy again, and empower you to live in that high place, on that lampstand. Cultivate joy.



Then lest this experience become stuck in the inward journey, maintain direct involvement with the joys and sufferings of the real world. Foster spiritual sensitivity toward all, so we always recognize a brother or sister

