

Is it really possible to be salt and light?
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Scripture passages: Matt. 5:13-16, 1 Cor. 1:1-7

Did you know that there is a cathedral in Colombia made almost entirely out of salt and light? It's true. About 50 kilometres north of the capital, Bogota, in the town of Zipaquirá, a former salt mine has been converted into a Roman Catholic cathedral {slide 1}. {slide 2} As you enter, the arching passage takes you 200 metres underground, where coloured lights glance off of the crystals in the salt-streaked rock, creating a stunning, iridescent glow. As you move along the passage, there are a number of chapels representing Jesus' life as well as the stations of the cross, complete with sculptures and crosses carved out of the salty rock – I have a few examples here {slides 3-6}. And at the end of the passage, you find the cavernous sanctuary, with its huge, jagged walls lit in various colours {slides 7-10}. The site is a destination for Christian pilgrimages and thousands of people flock there to worship on Sundays, finding sacred space in the striking combination of salt and light {slide 11}.

Was this what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of salt and light? Probably not. But what a beautiful and profoundly inspiring symbol for the calling of the church – that is, the *people* of God, the church *community* – to be the salt of the earth and light for the world!

Whenever I try to think about what the church is called to be, I remember a line from Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder: “The people of God is called to be

today what the world is called to be ultimately.”¹ Even after a summer of sermons on our theme of salt and light, you might not recognize this alternate articulation. It’s admittedly less vivid and imagination-grabbing than Jesus’ rich metaphors of salt and light, but I think it’s a kind of distillation of the same idea: the church is called to lend its flavour to the earth and its light to the world, to be a foretaste of the Reign of God, to light the way toward its coming in full. In other words, the church is a taste or glimpse of what’s to come as God’s way is followed on earth.

I remember first learning about this theological concept as a fresh-faced undergraduate, and being so inspired by it! Yoder paints an idyllic picture of the church as an exemplary community “before the watching world,” a community in which believers forgive one another, hold one another accountable in love, share what they have with one another, overcome divisions of ethnicity, gender, and class, and contribute to the life of the community, each according to his or her gifts. It’s a beautiful image! I also remember learning that in the Christian debates about whether it’s actually possible to follow Jesus and live according to God’s will, our Mennonite tradition comes out firmly on the optimistic side. No, we argued, sin does not completely taint human existence, making it impossible to truly live out our faith in the here and now. No, we don’t have to wait until the kingdom or kindom of God comes in full. It is possible to live as God wants us to, to follow the peaceful way of Jesus, because God makes us into a holy community, the church “without spot or wrinkle.” Sin doesn’t have the last word, but God’s work in us sanctifies us, makes us holy.

This is what the apostle Paul speaks about in the opening of his 1st Letter to the Corinthians which we heard read this morning. He speaks of the Corinthians as those

¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix.

who have been “sanctified,” even going so far as to call them “saints”! He speaks about the grace of God which has “enriched” the Corinthians with “spiritual gifts,” saying, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind [...] so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 4-5, 7). In other words, even in waiting for God’s Reign to come in full, the early church understood that it “was not lacking in any spiritual gift” – it was *already* sanctified, *already* a community of saints or holy ones. Isn’t that a powerful, empowering, and encouraging notion?

But, you might be thinking, isn’t this a rather tall order? At the same time as I was being inspired by theological ideas of the church as a sanctified community, I remember looking at the real, flesh-and-blood church and being disappointed with what I saw. Disunity, division, and a slowness to forgive seemed just as evident within the church as outside of it. And when it came to alleviating suffering or standing up for peace and justice, too often the church is just as hesitant to act as other communities. I was left wondering, so why doesn’t the church act like the sanctified community it supposedly is?! Why doesn’t it make use of the power and gifts it has been given? In other words, why does it squander its flavour and hide its light away?

Of course there are instances when I do see the church acting as salt and light, but even in those instances, it’s never pure. Let me explain what I mean by that. Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian and peace activist, experienced the same tension I’m talking about. She speaks of the church as traitor and the church as sister.

While I always find myself wincing at this statement, and wondering whether it’s really appropriate to call the church a “traitor,” it’s important to look at her context. Soelle grew up in Nazi Germany, and she applauds the churches that resisted the Nazis, often at great risk to themselves. Her own family hid a Jewish woman in their attic for a time, as did other Christians; this form of the church is the church as sister, the church which remains faithful to its difficult calling. But she also notes that for all of those churches which resisted the Nazis, many more supported or at least remained silent in the face of the Nazi agenda. In this light, the language of the church as “traitor” doesn’t seem too strong after all. And according to Soelle, there are modern-day versions of this manifestation of the church, anytime it forges alliances with “money and military power.” She writes, “again and again [it] betrays its own truth. In a biblical image, the church is often like Judas, who delivered Jesus to the established religious authorities. Or is it more like the male disciples, who discouraged and defeated, left Jesus alone and fled? And then there are times when the thought overtakes me that the church is like Peter, who denied that he had ever known anything at all about peace and justice. Very rarely do I see the church, like him, weeping bitter tears.”²

I see these two faces of the church – church as sister, church as traitor – in relation to other issues, as well. One of the instances in which the church is salt and light for me is in its overcoming of gender divisions and discrimination, and valuing of women’s voices and theological reflections and experiences. There are many churches that live out the conviction that men and women and all people are created in the image of the divine, that in Christ there is no male and female, as it says in Galatians, and that as per Jesus’ egalitarian ministry, we are to refuse to allow gender to limit the

² Soelle, *Against the Wind*, 25, 90.

discernment of gifts. That I, a woman, am able to stand before you and preach this morning seems ordinary in our context – we have only female pastors at TUMC, after all – but it’s no small thing. There are still churches in which women are forbidden even from reading Scripture during worship, never mind preaching or being ordained to pastoral ministry. Even in my parents’ lifetime, when they were MCEC youth workers in the 1980s, my mom remembers being asked to speak from beside the pulpit, because some churches were uncomfortable with having a woman speak from the actual pulpit! In these ways, the church betrays the holy egalitarianism to which it’s called, and thereby denies its saltiness and hides its light.

Another instance in which the church is salt and light for me is in its peace stance. From Jesus’ ministry of peacemaking and nonviolence to the examples of the early Christians and early Anabaptists who faced their deaths rather than resort to violence, Christian history is full of courageous people who trusted in God instead of in the power of violence, and I grew up hearing and being inspired by their stories. And in the present day, there are many Christians working to end violence and build peace through mediation, reconciliation and restorative justice; just development and the redistribution of economic resources; conscientious objection and the call for disarmament; and the active creation of communities of peace and right relation, such as Yoder envisioned. Organizations like Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams give me profound hope for the church and challenge me to take risks for the sake of peace. But for each Christian who is committed to Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies, there are many more who see war and violence as part of their Christian duty, as well as those who, not wanting to cause trouble, don’t do or say

anything to combat violence or promote peace. And even our peace tradition has its own shameful legacy which we haven't yet dealt with sufficiently: our complicity in the colonization of the First Peoples of this country, particularly through our participation in the horrific system of residential schools. Mennonite history is hardly “without spot or wrinkle.” In all of these ways, then, the church is both faithful sister and heartless traitor of its call to peacemaking.

So what does this duplicity mean for the church's ability to be salt and light? Is it ultimately impossible? Is it naïve to expect the church to be a taste and glimpse of the coming Reign of God, given its glaring failures? This is a common response to hopeful talk about the church. Yoder faced accusations of naivete for speaking about the church as a community which exemplifies the peace of Christ, and Soelle recounts that she was also asked, “But you do not really mean the church when you talk like this?” She would reply, “‘Yes indeed, that is how I imagine the church, and occasionally, that is how I experience it.’ . . . I pray that this is what the church might be.”³

Interestingly, this kind of prayer actually resonates with today's Scripture passages. Turning again to the lofty opening of 1st Corinthians, we might expect to find a correspondingly saintly description of the activities of the community in the rest of the letter. Well, no such luck! As you may recall, it actually reads more like a long list of scandals: believers are divided on whether they follow Jesus or Paul, someone has moved in with his step-mother and they are in a sexual relationship, believers are suing one another in court, people are eating food offered to idols, people are either going hungry or getting drunk at the Lord's Supper, and so on. This is hardly an exemplary

³ Soelle, 94-5.

community! And yet THESE are the people whom Paul calls saints?! There must be some mistake!

But, remarkably, Paul does call them saints, and he speaks about it in the present tense. He doesn't stipulate that once they work out these numerous serious issues, then they'll be worthy to be called saints or holy ones. Instead, at the very beginning of the letter, he already calls them saints, and says they're not lacking in any spiritual gifts. The implication is that they've already been sanctified by God, they're already saints, so they might as well start acting like it! There's nothing holding them back from living as a holy community right now.

The immediacy of it is striking, and it's mirrored elsewhere. Looking again at the salt and light passage in Matthew, we find that Jesus uses the present tense as well: “You *are* the salt of the earth,” he states. “You *are* the light of the world.” He doesn't say, “you will be” salt or “you will be” light. He doesn't even say, “you used to be salt and light, and have to recover that.” No, we already are salt and light, right now, in the present. So in that sense, it's not naïve to expect us to behave as such, as Jesus and Paul encourage us to do. In fact, it's ridiculous to waste our saltiness and squander our light! We are the salt of the earth, so why would we live as though we've lost our salty taste? That would make our gifts worthless! And we are the light of the world, as bright as a city on a hill, so why would we try to hide our light? The problem isn't that we're not good enough to be called salt and light, or that we're unworthy to be called saints. We, the church, are salt and light, and are sanctified. Even our shortcomings and downright betrayals of our calling can't undo its hold on us: we're still called and enabled to do the good work of being salt and light.

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I think the salt cathedral has one final insight to offer. It’s remarkable that such a hidden place draws so many people to its doors; in other words, even though it’s hidden deep underground, it’s still a beacon of faith; from a place of darkness, it still shines and inspires believers through God’s grace. That’s how it is with us as well. Even though we may try to hide our light and deny our flavour, God finds a way for them to come through, for the church today to take the shape of things to come.

So let’s live out our indelible identity. Nothing is holding us back, so let’s go be salt and light or, in Jesus’ words, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your [divine Parent] in heaven.” AMEN