**"Losing Our Zing?"**

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Texts: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10 and Matthew 5: 1-16

 It's tough to be the church these days. The political parties are working hard to usurp the church for their own purposes. More and more people are becoming "spiritual, but not religious". Clergy are leaving the ministry in record numbers. Churches are closing. The church is aging. Happy Sunday morning! I thought we were going to talk seasonings! But on this last Sunday of our study of the Beatitudes, especially with Jesus' invitation for us to be the "salt of the earth", we have to talk openly about what that means, and how we in the church may have lost our "zing" which is part of what's going on behind all the bad news.

 "Jesus says that those who live these happinesses, these Beatitudes, such people will be called 'the salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13). (Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, p142)" But what does that mean? Let's talk about salt for a minute. Margaret Feinburg relates that people in our day often misinterpret Jesus' reference to salt. Our salt is a more pure form than in Jesus' day, and it is infused with need nutrients like iodine and comes from a shaker, usually. In Jesus' day, salt was sourced and harvested with it's surrounding minerals. Yes, as you may be aware, it was used as a preservative.

 But it was more than that. Salt seasons food, unlocking flavor. It also was used as a disinfectant in Jesus' day. And like today, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing, but the right amount of salt will create unforgettable dishes. Just the right amount of salt. Maybe just a dash? Makes me think about last week regarding light, leaven and size related to impact in ministry. I hope all those images get you thinking.

 "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says. He is not saying that you are the salt that will get you into heaven. "He is saying that [those who live according to the Beatitudes] will be a certain kind of gift to the *earth* (Rohr, p142)!" One problem the church faces is that we often think of Jesus' teaching as a set of *prescriptions* for getting to heaven (even though we haven't followed them). "No, the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes are a set of descriptions of a *free* life (Rohr, p142-43)."

 Father Rohr continues:

 Jesus' moral teaching is very often a description of the final product rather than a detailed process for getting there. When you can weep, when you can identify with little ones, when you can make peace, when you can be persecuted and still by joyful; then you're doing it right. He is saying, as it were, this is what holiness will look like. When you act this way, 'the Kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21b).

 Take a moment and consider the church as you know it at every level, of every denomination and theological background. How often does the church gather to weep, identify with little ones, make peace...? Do we actually live out the Beatitudes in the best way possible? Are we the salt of the earth, or have we lost our zing?

 You know, people say that salt cannot lose it's flavor. Well, unless they say it can. Can the church and it's people lose our zing? Can we get focused on the wrong things and subsequently miss opportunities to include people, grow people, empower people?

 "Jesus has low control needs," says Father Rohr. Do we? I know sometimes I get too controlling, but where's the balance? I'm sure that neither Jesus nor Father Rohr want us to just be a free for all, but maybe we need to work on being more free...for all! Jesus' concern is, "proclamation, naming, revealing, stating. Then he trusts that good-willed people and a reliable God will take it from there. Jesus is not concerned about enforcement of uniformity." Wouldn't it be nice if church, in all it's forms, were similar? If salt becomes tasteless, how can we salt the world with it? Has the church becomes tasteless? Good question!

 "If we no longer believe the gospel, if no longer believe in nonviolence and powerlessness, then who's going to convert us?... It's seems that so many saints and prophets who start out to preach to the world come back to convert or reconvert the People of God. Until the church believes its own core message, there's no point in going out and telling other people to be Christian (Rohr, p143)." Frankly, we believe a lot of things, but we struggle to act accordingly. And while we're human and will make mistakes along the way, sometimes it feels like we've simply left Jesus and his message behind for something else and called it church, or faith, or Christianity, or whatever word you want to use. We don't present a different vision -- a different way of being -- than most of what the world has to offer. "Jesus' conclusion is rather pessimistic compared to our practice of plugging along with an awful lot of 'salt that has lost its zing.' He says, 'its' good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot."

 Ouch. But if we are going to take the Beatitudes seriously, let alone the rest of the Gospel, we have to spend time taking the speck out of our own eye before taking the log out of the eye of another. This is true of us as individuals and as a community called church.

 By calling his disciples salt of the earth, he's not saying they're the saved ones. He never tries to create a 'members-only' club. Jesus consistently says, in fact, that God loves those on the outside just as much as God loves the insiders; that there's just as much mercy *out* there as *in* there among Jesus' closest followers. If we don't believe our own message, we're good for nothing. We do more harm than good.

 Jesus is calling us to creative self-criticism and giving us the capacity for self-regeneration. As long as some people hold on to the upside- down wisdom of the gospel, it will be enough flavor for the whole meal of life. The Good News gives a taste to the world...Salt is tiny and invisible, but for ancient people it was the only preservative, the only spice, and often a symbol of healing. (Rohr, pp143-44)

 So why be in church? Why do we keep coming here and dealing with each other, which is sometimes easy and sometimes very hard? Clearly the church is imperfect, and Pastor just said that often the church completely misses the point and is no better than the rest of the world and should be just trampled under foot! Wouldn't we be better off to just be "spiritual, but not religious" and go on our own faith journey, which some believe is clearly more Christian than the church?

 Or, we could do what Jesus calls us to do. We could hold on to the upside-down wisdom of the Gospel. We could continue to challenge ourselves to love one another even more deeply. We could engage one another to better understand what Jesus is trying to tell us. We could re-commit ourselves to loving the world as Jesus loves it, AND re-commit ourselves to supporting one another on our faith journeys. For the church, at it's best, is a community of faith seekers who, regardless of their number or their lot in life, are dedicated to being the best versions of ourselves possible. We NEED community to make that happen. It's needed and necessary to have others to share this journey of life together.

 "Jesus says we are a mere mustard seed, we are leaven, we are the pearl of great price, we are a hidden treasure in the field." It's not our size that matters. It's not our status in the world that matters. It is our willingness to be exactly what God calls us to be...salt and light. Put succinctly, "Our job is to be a shining truth, to live on the mountaintop, to live the truth as best we can and let it fall where it may. What a difficult and non-pushy way to live! [For] the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better."

 Obviously the world is not all going to become Christian. For the most part, the only people who are being converted to Christianity today are secular types and animists. If we can be salt, and light, and leaven, those things will do the work, and God's purposes will be achieved. Whether or not there is a church will take care of itself. Our job is to simply be faithful.

 "You are the salt of the earth." Don't lose your zing, church!

 Amen.