

CHARGED WITH A SALT ON THE SABBATH

Sermon, February 6, 2011

Texts: Isaiah 58; Matthew 5:13-20

Watching the television coverage of the rioting in Egypt this week called to mind a number of memories from a ten-day trip I took to Cairo, Luxor and environs in 1987; I attended a pastors' conference hosted by the English-speaking Maadi Community Church which was a wonderfully informative, fascinating and engaging experience including several guided tours, special visits, as well as a side trip (*overnight*) to the traditional site of Mt. Sinai. The television coverage also called to my mind's memory coverage I watched of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Many of you remember those riots, which were sparked on April 29, 1992, when twelve jurors rendered their verdicts in a controversial case involving the 1991 beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers following a high speed pursuit. The case had received heavy media coverage when a video of the beating hit the national airwaves. When the verdicts were read ... one officer was found guilty of excessive force; the others were cleared of all charges ... word spread quickly throughout Los Angeles. At various points throughout the city that afternoon, people began rioting. For the next three days the violence and mayhem continued. Mayor Tom Bradley imposed a curfew, schools and businesses were closed, Governor Pete Wilson dispatched 4,000 National Guard troops. People stayed home, watching on TV with the rest of the country as live coverage showed fires raging throughout the city, innocent bystanders being assaulted, looters sacking businesses. The final toll was devastating: Fifty three people killed, over four thousand injured, twelve thousand (!) were arrested, and there was over \$1 billion in property damage.

During those riots a brave NBC radio reporter by the name of Steve Futterman attempted to interview looters emerging from the broken doors and shattered windows of a downtown department store. He asked one looter, with his arms full, "What did you take?" The man, caught like a deer in headlights, replied, "Nothing!" and ran off. The same question to a second man resulted in expletives that, um, I won't repeat from the pulpit. Not giving up, the intrepid reporter pursued a third man. "What did you take?" he asked. The looter replied, "I got me some gospel music! I love Jesus!" (*later reported in the Los Angeles Times, 10/4/92*)

Our Gospel text for the day is about people who love Jesus, but hopefully in a more positive and constructive way. Perhaps our Old Testament text is more appropriate for our looting Gospel music aficionado; God addresses people there who live one way on Sunday and their own way the other days of the week ... people who give lip service in worship, but live otherwise. Here in Matthew, though, Jesus addressed those who genuinely profess love for Him ... He addressed His followers, He addressed those who took time out of their weeks to gather before Him to hear His words and seek His guidance, those who genuinely profess love for Him by word and action ... these are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus told them. He did not say, "Someday in the future you will be 'the salt of the earth.'" Jesus told them they were already the salt of the earth. "You are the light of the world," Jesus affirmed His disciples. Jesus did not say, "Someday in the future, if you do all I tell you to do, you will be the 'light of the world.'" No, they were already the "light of the world."

I came across a little multiple choice quiz put out by the Morton Salt Company; I'd like to share six of the questions with you:

- 1) What did Julius Caesar cherish most? (a) Friends, (b) Romans, (c) Countrymen, (d) Salt.

The answer is Salt. In the ancient world, salt was as good as gold. It was a precious substance, hard to find and an eagerly desired necessity as well as a luxury. Ancient trade routes were established because of salt; when supplies ran out, empires fell. In fact, part of a Roman's soldier's wage was a bag of salt ... hence the origin of the phrase, "a man worth his salt." A man "worth his salt" is a man who earned his keep. This is also the root origin of our word "sal-ary."

- 2) Which word comes from salt? (a) Salad, (b) Salary, (c) Salvation, (d) Salute.

Actually, the answer is all of the above, not just "b" as explained in #1. Forgive the pun, but the English language is peppered with words derived from and/or related to the word salt. As salt was such a vital and valued necessity in antiquity, it worked its way into many idioms and figures of speech, and from there into the common language.

- 3) Which of the following was Columbus trying to find? (a) Diamonds, (b) Rubies, (c) Salt, (d) Ohio

As you may have guessed by now, the answer is C, Salt. Like a lot of history's great movers and shakers, Columbus owes at least some of his fame to salt. Ferdinand and Isabella sent him off to who-knows-where with strict orders to bring home boatloads of salt. At its height in the fifteenth century, Venice was beautiful, powerful, famous and fabulously rich. Though its wealth is often attributed to the trade in spice, the fact is most of that spice was salt. In fact, just about any time you read in history about the search for spices and wealth, the adventurers were not seeking parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme on their way to Scarborough Fair; merchants were seeking primarily the "spice" of salt. Salzburg, Austria, that center of fine arts known to many of us as "The Sound of Music" town of Maria Von Trapp and family, was built around a *Salz* (*German for "salt"*) mine.

- 4) Which of the following was stolen from George Washington? (a) His teeth, (b) His ammunition, (c) His wig, (d) His salt
D, his salt. In 1777, British troops captured the lion's share of General Washington's all-important salt supply. Toms River, NJ was a strategically important salt works in colonial times. Salt was used to cure meat, meat that was packed as rations and used to feed the Continental Army. For a time, this strategic capture by the British served to starve the upstart Americans of food rations, as well as robbing them of a nutrient absolutely vital to their health. It left them ill-supplied for life on the military field, crippling their readiness and ability to fight.
- 5) What shape changed the history of salt? (a) The pyramid, (b) The diamond, (c) The cylinder, (d) The pentagon
The answer is C, the cylinder. Before 1911, salt was sold in big bags and the salt wouldn't pour when the weather was wet and/or the humidity high. Morton's new cylinder-shaped package was not only moisture-proof, it had a perfect shape for pouring and it came with its own handy spout. Hence, the logo on the Morton salt container under the little girl with the yellow umbrella: "When it rains, it pours."
- 6) Which of these can't you live without? (a) Money, (b) Love, (c) Chocolate, (d) Salt
All of the above. (*Just kidding*) The answer is Salt. Although it is nice to have all of the above, the only true necessity, physiologically speaking, is salt. The sodium salt provides regulates the heartbeat and the body's balance of fluids.

From the historical context of salt's value and vital importance, we have to see that Jesus was *complimenting* His followers when He said to them, "You are the salt of the earth." He was giving them high praise! In today's vernacular, He would be telling them, "You are as good as gold, you are precious, you are hard to find but valuable to discover, you are a necessary, vital and indispensable commodity in this world!" For salt was something very special ... a treasured commodity, a precious substance, a necessary and vital and indispensable product.

Precious as it was, salt would have been found in every home in the Palestine of Jesus' day. It was not just an inexpensive tabletop extra as it is in our homes today; it was a necessity, and probably the most valuable and expensive necessity, in the house. It was the best preservative in a world without refrigeration. People would rub salt into meat or fish, or would leave it to soak in briny water, in order to preserve it, because salt arrests the spread of bacteria. It was also commonly used as an antiseptic to stop the spread of germs; rubbing salt into a wound was actually a good thing to do. It doesn't sound very pleasant, but it was very effective in fighting infection. And though there was no electricity, they did have light ... oil lamps would be lit when the sun went down to dispel darkness in the home. And Jesus says to His disciples, He says to those who are conscientious enough to take time out of their weeks to gather there around Him to hear his words, He says to *you* ... "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!"

What does He mean? Besides the fact that He is paying His followers a huge compliment, conveying to them just how precious they are, Jesus means that His followers permeate and penetrate and preserve and brighten up their community and their society in the same manner as salt and light. To perform its preserving function, the salt soaks into the meat. To perform its illuminating function, the light shines out into the darkness. They influence and preserve and brighten up the world in which they live by the way they live, beginning right in their homes. Jesus equips and trains and encourages and expects His followers to permeate their community as salt and light in order to make it *better*. "You are the ones!" Jesus says, who hinder and even halt the degeneration of your culture just as salt hinders the degeneration of meat and fish. "You are the ones!" Jesus says, who dispel the darkness of viciousness and vice from your community with the light of your faithful lives.

Without salt, meat rots. That is the nature of meat; that is what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. There is no sense in blaming the meat. The question to ask is, "Where is the salt?" Without the salty influence of Jesus' followers, the same happens to our culture. And without light, things get dark. That's what happens when the sun goes down. If culture becomes corrupt like a stinking pot roast or a darkened night, well, that's what happens when human evil is allowed to go unrestrained and unchecked. Don't underestimate the power and influence that you as individual Christians can exert in the community and in your world. The salty influence of Jesus through His followers can do much to preserve human society and to hinder and even halt its decay, and it can do much to brighten up a darkened world. It has in the past, it will in the present, and it will continue to do so in the future. May God increasingly enable and equip us to be His salt and light in our world.

I end with this thought. You know, criminologists tell us no person enters and exits a room without leaving something of themselves behind. There will be a fingerprint, a footprint, a trace of hair, a thread of clothing or some DNA evidence that we have been there and done that. As we come here to the Lord's Table today, I would like to ask you as disciples of Jesus this question: What kind of evidence are you leaving behind in the world out there?

I hope it's enough evidence to successfully charge you with "A Salt" (*or, with being "salt"*). Amen?