

Scripture  
Matthew 5: 13-20

**Salt and Light:** (adaptation from a sermon by Rev. Michelle Slater,)

“It’s hard to be the church these days. Or at least, it’s hard to be the mainline Protestant church here in the Western world, in the year 2013.”<sup>1</sup> Those were the first lines of a sermon my friend Rev. Michelle Slater sent me on Friday when I emailed my colleagues and said “I need inspiration.” Sometimes people ask “how to you come up with something every week?” I guess the reality is I don’t have a choice - just like someone teaching, or writing paper articles, or telling the news, or really any kind of work. We do what we need to do and sometimes we feel more inspired than others. This was one of those weeks where the thoughts were in my head but I was having trouble putting them onto paper. I know why I was having trouble. It is because right now it feels hard to be church these days.

Another local pastor and I were having a conversation the other day about just that. We want to do mission, we want to care for people, we want to show people the Jesus way but it is almost as if life has gotten too hard for most to take care of their spiritual lives. That or they want a quick fix. Or maybe it is the opposite they have learned giving to others, living counter culturally is just too hard. Our dominant culture in Squamish sees themselves as their own God/ Goddess, as the creator of their own universe and power. I honestly think that greed and arrogance is what has gotten our world and our economy into this struggle in the first place. We live in a world where what is right and wrong gets to be determined by the individual and the more powerful you are the more leeway you have. I wanted to preach one more sermon on being counter cultural - looking

---

<sup>1</sup> October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Salt and Light: Matthew 5: 13-20 Rev. Michelle Slater Oak Bay United Church

at the beatitudes and seeing how Jesus turns the world upside-down but it felt like you would hear that as old news and then Michelle's sermon reminded me of some other recent old news that Rev. Peter Short shares.

Rev. Peter Short, a former moderator of the United Church of Canada, has said for several years now that "our current challenge, and call, is "planting a Jesus-community in the ruins of the 'ancien regime'." He notes that we are living through the passing of an entire way of being the church. One where the church had power and influence. Where every person you met was a Christian and went to church. Where stores were closed on Sundays and the minister was a figure of authority and status in town, like the teacher, the doctor and the lawyer.

Church historians call that time "Christendom" a combination of the words "Christian" and "kingdom" Christendom, that state of being where the political governments and the Christian Church worked hand in hand, began a long time ago, in the year 325 AD, to be exact. That's when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared that not only was Christianity now legal (and no longer were its followers to be persecuted). He also declared Christianity to be the state religion. So if you wanted to rise in the ranks of the Roman power structure, whether socially or politically, you had better convert to Christianity.

That state of close relationship between Christianity and culture, that we call Christendom, went on to last almost two thousand years. It started to break down about three hundred years ago, with the Enlightenment in Europe, and the development of the scientific method, leading to rising secularism; along with the significant presence of those practicing other religions.

Yet it took a while longer for that relationship to really come apart, in our culture. I hear it often because some of you have seen that breakdown in your own lifetime, with the assumptions you had as children, about your neighbours and friends and kids you were at school with, now radically changed. Within fifty

years, the Christian church has found itself pushed from the centre, to the margins. Finding ourselves struggling against not just indifference from many or most of our fellow citizens, but sometimes outright hostility. In a conversation the other day with Rev. Cameron from St. John's he quipped "I'm not worried about a thing, lets be honest I never saw this Christendom thing these people talk about. It's nothing new to me and I don't plan on going anywhere, church isn't any different today than when I joined in."

And yet for many, the church has been "disestablished" from what seemed, for over 1500 years, like our natural and God-given place. No wonder we're finding it tough. As our congregations age and shrink; as our booming Sunday schools are a distant memory; as we struggle with deficits and sustaining ourselves financially; it is easy to feel discouraged, defeated, and humiliated.

Which we could see as a failure...or, as a gift. The word 'humiliate' comes from the Latin *humilis*, which means 'low'. So to be humiliated is to be brought low, low in others' (or our own) esteem or regard. But the word goes back further. The Latin *humilis* itself comes from the word *humus* which means...earth.

What if the church's displacement, disestablishment, loss of status and influence, is not so much about our failure or defeat, as it is simply about being brought low again? Brought low to the earth: where things that are dying, decompose and add their richness to what is about to be born anew. Brought low to those who are searching, and questioning. Brought low to those who are low: who are hungry, and thirsty, and homeless, and persecuted, which is where we will find Jesus and paradoxically, mysteriously, a blessing.

Perhaps returning to the bottom, is a gift for the church. After all, it's how the church began. The gospels were written for a very small minority of people, living through great oppression and persecution by the Roman Empire. These Christians were oppressed and persecuted because they were a tiny minority, on the

margins of their society and culture, who did not share the allegiances of the rest of the empire. And for that, they were distrusted and persecuted as traitors to the state.

Maybe that's why it made sense for them to hear, "You are the salt of the earth". Because you don't need much salt, to make a big difference in a meal. And you can't have a meal with just salt. It seems the church was never meant to be the whole meal, the whole culture, the whole power structure. The church was born as a tiny community of people, meant to flavour the world with the good news of Jesus. And when it grew too powerful, it gave up its saltiness, its challenge to the priorities of the Empire, and became domesticated and docile. And what happens when salt has lost its saltiness? "It is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

And, it made sense to be told, "You are the light of the world". In their lives, the light Jesus describes was a small, smoky lamp lighting up a pitch black darkness. (There were no street lights, or electronics to give light to their towns and villages at night, so it was really, really dark.) Yet, they knew, that even the immense black darkness could not put out their lamp. And that even that small flame could light up a room.

They knew that they were never going to be ALL light, everywhere, at every time; that the world would continue to know darkness until the kingdom Jesus embodied came into being. They were going to be a small light, yet each one able to light their own home and neighbourhood and together, lighting their community and workplaces and world.

I wonder if we can hear that we are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world, with new ears. For now, we too, like the earliest Christians, find ourselves as part of a small minority, in a larger culture that is sometimes indifferent, and sometimes hostile. For many of you, you are the only one in your family, or workplace, or gym, or community group, who is a Christian. And you know better

than to mention it to your colleagues; or if you do, it is with an apologetic tone and an effort to seem “normal” despite your church-going habit.

And that is the temptation, isn't it, when the church is humiliated? It's tempting to embrace being smaller and less powerful, and circle our wagons to focus inward. To focus on our own survival as an organization. And if we have. A bit of extra time we might even think about focussing on a spiritual journey. And if we stick to ourselves we can avoid uncomfortable conversations with others. To abandon a world that seems to have abandoned the church. To focus on the ways the world focuses to try and make ourselves powerful again rather than offering the light that is necessary in a time of struggle.

But the church has a mission, a purpose, that is bigger than ourselves and our wants and needs. It has a purpose given to us by God. Jesus' words to the disciples, and to us, are not a call or an invitation or even a challenge: “you should be the salt of the earth...the light of the world.” They are a descriptor, a statement of plain fact about our identity as those who follow Jesus: “You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world.” That's who you are, and what you do. And we ARE still needed in the world, to point to the life that we know in Jesus. The way of the kingdom of God. The way of life that gives life, in a world bent on dealing death. I hold this so closely.

It's a hard time to be the church, to plant a Jesus-community in the ruins of the ‘ancien regime’, there's no denying that. Yet, it is also an exciting time to be the church, maybe THE most exciting time since those first crowds started to follow Jesus. Because God is up to something, in us, and in the church, and in the world. Because we are drawing on a presence and a power and an energy that is older and wiser and bigger and more mysterious and life-giving than we could ever come up with on our own. And because as we find ourselves returning to the

bottom, Jesus promises that that is where we find a blessing. Thanks be to God!  
Amen.