

Scriptures: Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

The Dead Sea

The Dead Sea lies on the western border of modern-day Israel. It's the saltiest body of water on the planet. In fact, it's so full of salt, that nothing can live in its waters. Approximately 5,000 years or so before Jesus' birth, another man walked along the shore of the Dead Sea. His name was Lot.

Lot was a nephew of Abram, who we know as Abraham – since God made a covenant with him and changed his name. You know the story of Lot, right church? He lived in Sodom, and when the angels came to tell his family to get out of the city, what did Lot's wife do? She looked back. What happened to her? She turned into a pillar of salt. You can go over there today on a tour and see a pillar of salt they call "Lot's wife."

Even though the Dead Sea is very salty, the water evaporates there, too. When it does, it leaves pillars of salt and minerals along the seashore. The other mineral usually left behind is one called gypsum. Does anybody know what gypsum looks like? In its crystalline form, it looks a lot like table salt. Of course, we eat salt. We use it to add flavor to our food. Does anyone know what gypsum is used for? Don't answer if you do – it's a rhetorical question – I'll tell you what people do with it a little bit later today. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 5:13-20.

Read Matthew 5:13-20.

You Are Salt

Last week we looked at the opening lines of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – what's known as the beatitudes. This week we're continuing to look at what He says. "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot," (Matt. 5:13), He tells us. Now, I want to pause right here and say a couple things.

Jesus is God. He knows all about the Dead Sea – and that whole area, even better than modern-day scientists do. He also knows that the people on the hillside get their salt from the Dead Sea. If they're grabbing salt crystals to grind up for their food, and gypsum looks like salt, they're going to be picking up some gypsum crystals along the way. Gypsum is going to get ground up and put into their salt shakers along with the salt – and it's going to weaken and change the flavor.

The other thing I'm just going to say with regards to this idea of "throwing out and trampling underfoot," is this – that's not our role. You and I are not to be the throwers and the trampers. Now that's a wake up call for a lot of modern-day Christians, I know. You've probably heard stories of people being excommunicated from the Church. They used to do that back in the old days. If someone didn't conform to Biblical standards,

they were told about it. Oftentimes they'd be told they would literally burn for it. You know what I'm getting at. I want you think about this though – are you qualified enough to pass judgment on another individual? In a nutshell, that's what excommunication is – passing judgment – telling someone they don't belong. Who do we think we are, to be so bodacious and full of ourselves to think anyone does not belong, for any reason? It's best for us to just let God be the Judge!

You Are Light

Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven," (verses 14-16).

Kendra and I love grilling out on a charcoal grill in our backyard in the summer. I love cooking on charcoal. Steaks, chicken breasts, and pork chops taste so much better cooked over charcoal than gas in my opinion. If you have a charcoal grill, what happens when you're trying to light it, if you don't have the vents opened just right? The flame gets snuffed out. I love cooking on charcoal, but it usually takes me about three tries to get it lit! We're called to be lights – lamps – illuminating the dark pathways of this world for fellow travelers to come closer to Jesus Christ through us and how we treat them.

There are a lot of errors in the modern Church, and in the history of the Church. And because we're all humans here at New Hope, I'll say this – we don't get it right, either. I've heard people say things like, "we're New Testament people," or "the Old Testament is for the Jews." That's wrong. We're supposed to be people of the Bible – and the Old Testament is just as applicable today as it was when Moses first sat down to write Genesis.

Look what Jesus says. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished," (verses 17-18). He's talking about the Old Testament here. Jesus says it still applies – and He's right. Without the Old Testament to point out the sinfulness of humanity, what good would the New Testament be?

Pointing to Christ

It amazes me to think that all those customs, those rituals that the ancient Israelites did for thousands of years as acts of worship – such as praying, reading Scripture, fasting, fighting injustice, gathering in communal worship settings and feasts – all point us to the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He's the ultimate sacrificial Lamb, who washes us clean with His blood on the cross. The depths of the love of God are unimaginable. That He loves us so much to lay aside His Glory to come here as a

Human and take the nails for your sin and mine – it is the most Holy Mystery of our faith. It can't be explained or fully understood.

Look at how serious this is to Jesus. "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven," (verse 19). As we work out our salvation through an on-going, deepening relationship with Christ, we should be striving to follow what the Bible says. We heard in our first Scripture passage something of what many of the Old Testament writings were focused on. Seven hundred or eight hundred years before the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, the Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isa. 58:6-7).

That's what God wants of us. To follow Christ, and do things His way. Jesus gave the crowd a warning that day, and gives it to us today as well. "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven," (Matt. 5:20). I'm seeing this more and more. There are folks running around who know more than the Pharisees did. They know more than the Sadducees did. If you listen to some of these well known pastor-authors long enough, you may even find out they know more about Jesus Christ than St. Paul did, and he wrote half the New Testament!

Do you know anyone like that? I have an older cousin who regularly attends a large church in town. She's very involved in it, and in parachurch organizations with which it's affiliated. But from the way she acts and talks about other people, you'd think she walks on water while the rest of us are barely keeping our heads afloat! She's been like that for years. My dad says she's "holier-than-thou," and tells me not to tell her anything going on with him because he doesn't want her to come out to the house!

Spiritual Pride

The "spiritual pride," or egos, that so many in the evangelical wing of the Church have become infected with is going to be the cause of great sorrow to them when Jesus comes again. Some of these people have so much knowledge and wisdom – or they think they do, anyhow – I don't know how they manage to get up out of bed in the mornings without snapping their necks! It's already a source of pain and sorrow to those they've driven away from God. We have nothing to be proud of, friends. Jesus alone is to be praised!

Right along with this idea is the fact that if people don't like something happening in a particular church or denomination, they leave. They go on to the next place down the road. We've seen that within the United Methodist Church at the denomination-

level recently, with disaffiliation. And friends, I'm sorry to say, but we've seen individuals leave New Hope because they didn't like certain things.

Last spring there was an older couple – a husband and wife – who came here for about a month. They were church shopping, former members from the Lockington church which closed. They sat in the center, about two rows from the back, on this side of the center aisle. After the first week the wife complained to me that she had a hard time hearing the sermon. I assumed it was because of our young people. They can be noisy. So, I told her about the hearing aid devices we have here that are hardwired into the frequency on my microphone.

Did you know we had that technology here? We've had them up in the sound booth for several years. The next week she picked one up, used it, and did that for the next two weeks. At the end of the service on the fourth week, she told me, "Pastor, you have a great church – everyone's friendly. As far as I can tell, you preach a great sermon. But we aren't coming back, because we can't hear you." I apologized for our kids being noisy – and was told it wasn't the kids!

Don't Be Gypsum

Look, Christ calls us to be salt and light. Part of being salt is for you and me to bring our flavorful selves out of those situations and ordinary ways that serve our selves first, and others later. Pursuing self-serving and self-seeking interests is distasteful for Christians to do. Instead, we need to flip our saltshakers to get the gypsum of self out. Don't be gypsum. It doesn't taste very good. By the way, it's what they use to make drywall and plaster – I almost forgot to tell you!

We need to put the needs of others ahead of what we want. If we're going to be light, we have to keep the flame lit and then be a good spark to "pass it on." How do we do that? By being plugged into daily Bible reading, daily prayer, making yourself available to serve in the ministries of the church, and beyond in the wider, secular community. Basically, it's a life dedicated in service to others.

Attending worship services as often as possible is a practice that helps deepen our faith and our relationships with others. And lastly – which we'll get to in a moment – to partake of the Sacraments of the Church as often as possible. When we do these things and when we truly follow Christ we'll "do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and spend ourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then our light will rise in the darkness, and our night will become like the noonday," (Isa. 58:10).

Prayer: O God of light, Your searching Spirit reveals and illumines Your Presence in creation. Shine Your radiant holiness into our lives, that we may offer our hands and hearts to Your work: to heal and shelter, to feed and clothe, to break every yoke and silence scoffers' tongues. Amen.