

McCabe United Methodist Church
Salt & Light for the Kingdom
Sermon on Matthew 5:13-16 (7/23 & 7/24/16)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Jesus said, “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 [under foot].

“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.”

We are the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.”

Salt and light...that's us.

When I was in elementary school, we had the option to participate in small groups that read and discussed short stories that were part of a series called *Junior Great Books*. (Some of you may be familiar with this series.)

I do not remember many of the stories we read in *Junior Great Books*, but the two I remember most clearly are very fitting for today's Scripture reading from Matthew chapter five...and these two stories are very fitting for today because one of them is about salt and the other is about light.

The first one I will simply summarize for you. The second one, however, is so perfect and so beautiful, I'm going to read most of it.

The first story is an English fairy tale called “Cap-o'-Rushes” and it is the story about salt...this is the bare bones of it:

A rich man had three daughters and, one day, he asked each of them to tell him how much they loved him. The first daughter said she loved her father as much as life itself...

the second daughter said she loved her father as much as the world...and the third daughter said she loved him as much as fresh meat loves salt. This answer infuriated the man and he sent his third daughter away, claiming she must not love him at all.

So the young woman designed herself an outfit of rushes to cover her fine clothes. (In case you're wondering, "rushes" are the leaves of a plant in the "rush" family of plants.) Then, she secured herself a job as the scullery maid of a wealthy family...and, because of her outfit, the other servants called her "Cap-o'-Rushes."

Time passed and, through a series of events, Cap-o'-Rushes ended up falling in love with the son of her master and they got married. Her own father was invited to the wedding feast and, knowing he would be there – but would not recognize her as his daughter – Cap-o'-Rushes ordered the cooks to prepare the meal without salt.

As the guests ate the tasteless, salt-free wedding feast, Cap-o'-Rushes' father broke-down crying when he thought back to what his long-lost daughter had once said to him.

When she had told him she loved him as much as fresh meat loves salt, he had been foolish not to realize she was being clever and that she did, in fact, love him very much. Then, of course, Cap-o'-Rushes revealed herself to her father and they were happily reunited.

The other *Junior Great Books* story we read that struck me as so perfect for today's message is a story by science fiction writer Ray Bradbury. The story is called "All Summer in a Day" and I'm actually going to read the majority of it to you now.

[Starting now, until the next bracketed, bolded statement, the text is from “All Summer in a Day” by Ray Bradbury.]

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Now?”

“Soon.”

“Do the scientists really know? Will it happen today, will it?”

“Look, look; see for yourself!”

The children pressed to each other like so many roses, so many weeds, intermixed, peering out for a look at the hidden sun.

It rained.

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain... A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

“It's stopping, it's stopping!”

“Yes, yes!”

Margo stood apart from them, from these children who could never remember a time when there wasn't rain and rain and rain. They were all nine years old, and if there had been a day, seven years ago, when the sun came out for an hour and showed its face to the stunned world, they could not recall...

All day yesterday they had read in class about the sun. About how like a lemon it was, and how hot. And they had written small stories or essays or poems about it:

I think the sun is a flower, That blooms for just one hour. That was Margo's poem, read in a quiet voice in the still classroom while the rain was falling outside.

“Aw, you didn't write that!” protested one of the boys.

“I did,” said Margo. “I did.”

“William!” said the teacher.

But that was yesterday. Now the rain was slackening, and the children were crushed in the great thick windows.

“Where's teacher?”

“She'll be back.”

“She'd better hurry, we'll miss it!”

They turned on themselves, like a feverish wheel, all tumbling spokes. Margo stood alone. She was a very frail girl who looked as if she had been lost in the rain for years and the rain had washed out the blue from her eyes and the red from her mouth and the yellow from her hair. She was an old photograph dusted from an album, whitened away, and if she spoke at all her voice would be a ghost. Now she stood, separate, staring at the rain and the loud wet world beyond the huge glass.

“What're *you* looking at?” said William.

Margo said nothing.

“Speak when you're spoken to.”

He gave her a shove. But she did not move; rather she let herself be moved only by him and nothing else. They edged away from her, they would not look at her. She felt them go away. And this was because she would play no games with them in the echoing tunnels of the underground city. If they tagged her and ran, she stood blinking after them and did not follow. When the class sang a song about happiness and life and games her lips barely moved. Only when they sang about the sun and the summer did her lips move as she watched the drenched windows. And then, of course, the biggest crime of all was that she had come here only five years ago from Earth, and she remembered the sun and the way the sun was and the sky was when she was four in Ohio. And they, they had been on Venus all their lives, and they had been only two years old when last the sun came out and had long since forgotten the color and heat of it and the way it really was.

But Margo remembered.

“It's like a penny,” she said once, eyes closed.”

“No, it's not!” the children cried.

“It's like a fire,” she said, “in the stove.”

“You're lying, you don't remember!” cried the children.

But she remembered and stood quietly apart from all of them and watched the patterning windows. And once, a month ago, she had refused to shower in the school shower rooms, had clutched her hands to her ears and over her head, screaming the water mustn't touch her head. So after that, dimly, dimly, she sensed it, she was different and they knew her difference and kept away. There was talk that her father and mother were taking her back to Earth next year; it seemed vital to her that they do so, though it would mean the loss of thousands of dollars to her family. And so, the children hated her for all these reasons of big and little consequence. They hated her pale snow face, her waiting silence, her thinness, and her possible future.

"Get away!" The boy gave her another push. "What're you waiting for?"

Then, for the first time, she turned and looked at him. And what she was waiting for was in her eyes.

"Well, don't wait around here!" cried the boy savagely. "You won't see nothing!"

Her lips moved.

"Nothing!" he cried. "It was all a joke, wasn't it?" He turned to the other children. "Nothing's happening today. *Is it?*"

They all blinked at him and then, understanding, laughed and shook their heads.

"Nothing, nothing!"

"Oh, but," Margo whispered, her eyes helpless. "But this is the day, the scientists predict, they say, they *know*, the sun..."

"All a joke!" said the boy, and seized her roughly. "Hey, everyone, let's put her in a closet before the teacher comes!"

"No," said Margot, falling back.

They surged about her, caught her up and bore her, protesting, and then pleading, and then crying, back into a tunnel, a room, a closet, where they slammed and locked the door. They stood looking at the door and saw it tremble from her beating and throwing herself against it. They heard her muffled cries.

Then, smiling, they turned and went out and back down the tunnel, just as the teacher arrived.

“Ready, children?” She glanced at her watch.

“Yes!” said everyone.

“Are we all here?”

“Yes!”

The rain slackened still more.

They crowded to the huge door.

The rain stopped.

It was as if, in the midst of a film concerning an avalanche, a tornado, a hurricane, a volcanic eruption, something had, first, gone wrong with the sound apparatus, thus muffling and finally cutting off all noise, all of the blasts and repercussions and thunders, and then, second, ripped the film from the projector and inserted in its place a beautiful tropical slide which did not move or tremor. The world ground to a standstill ... The door slid back and the smell of the silent, waiting world came in to them.

The sun came out.

It was the color of flaming bronze and it was very large. And the sky around it was a blazing blue color. And the jungle burned with sunlight as the children, released from their spell, rushed out, yelling into the springtime.

“Now, don't go too far,” called the teacher after them. “You've only two hours, you know. You wouldn't want to get caught out!”

But they were running and turning their faces up to the sky and feeling the sun on their cheeks like a warm iron; they were taking off their jackets and letting the sun burn their arms.

“Oh, it's better than the sun lamps, isn't it?”

“Much, much better!”

They stopped running and stood in the great jungle that covered Venus, that grew and never stopped growing, tumultuously, even as you watched it...

The children lay out, laughing, on the jungle mattress, and heard it sigh and squeak under them resilient and alive. They ran among the trees, they slipped and fell, they pushed each other, they played hide-and-seek and tag, but most of all they squinted at the sun until the tears ran down their faces; they put their hands up to that yellowness and that amazing blueness and they breathed of the fresh, fresh air and listened and listened

to the silence which suspended them in a blessed sea of no sound and no motion. They looked at everything and savored everything. Then, wildly, like animals escaped from their caves, they ran and ran and ran in shouting circles. They ran for an hour and did not stop running.

And then –

In the midst of their running one of the girls wailed.

Everyone stopped.

The girl, standing in the open, held out her hand.

“Oh, look, look,” she said, trembling.

They came slowly to look at her opened palm.

In the center of it, cupped and huge, was a single raindrop. She began to cry, looking at it. They glanced quietly at the sun.

“Oh. Oh.”

A few cold drops fell on their noses and their cheeks and their mouths. The sun faded behind a stir of mist. A wind blew cold around them. They turned and started to walk back toward the underground house, their hands at their sides, their smiles vanishing away.

A boom of thunder startled them and like leaves before a new hurricane, they tumbled upon each other and ran. Lightning struck ten miles away, five miles away, a mile, a half mile. The sky darkened into midnight in a flash.

They stood in the doorway of the underground for a moment until it was raining hard. Then they closed the door and heard the gigantic sound of the rain falling in tons and avalanches, everywhere and forever.

“Will it be seven more years?”

“Yes. Seven.”

Then one of them gave a little cry.

“Margo!”

“What?”

“She's still in the closet where we locked her.”

“Margot.”

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They

could not meet each other's glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

“Margo.”

One of the girls said, “Well...?”

No one moved.

“Go on,” whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of the cold rain.

They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margo out.

[End of story.]

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? ... You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before [others], that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

I had another whole sermon well in progress that attempted to get at some truth found in Acts chapter 16 – the section of Acts that follows our summer series on the book of Acts. But, for various reasons, that chapter wasn't sitting well with me this week. And the sermon I'd written was not the sermon God wanted me to preach.

Besides, all through this week, and in the midst of our 24-hour news cycle, the Holy Spirit kept whispering to me, “Salt and light...salt and light.” So I thought of this Gospel reading from Matthew 5.

I thought about “salt” and “light” and how we Christians are called to be both salt and light for this desperately hurting world. I thought about all that is going on in our nation and throughout the globe...and these two stories I learned in childhood would not let go of me.

Without salt, food is tasteless – one could argue it's not even worth eating. And without light...well, the world is unlivable.

Though it's recently been a hot, muggy summer in these parts, think about *winter* in North Dakota: we understand better than most just how necessary both salt and light are if we are to survive.

When the roads and sidewalks are icy, we don't dare make our way outside without salt...and when the darkness and cold settles in, it is grace from God when we see and feel the sun on our skin.

No, Jesus is not speaking literally about salt and light when he reminds us we *are* the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.”

Of course he is here speaking in metaphor. Of course he reminding us that others will look to his followers to see what God's love and glory look like.

And we know what they look like, right? We know what it feels like when someone offers grace to us: it feels like the security of salt underfoot on an icy walkway...it looks like the sun rising after a fearful, hopeless time.

It's not winter right now...but with all the anger and violence in our world, it can sure feel dark and cold, can't it – even on these hot, summer days.

Yet we *are* God's blessed and beloved children: we *are* the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So, when we leave this place of worship today, may the world see in us the love and glory of our loving, glorious God. Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.