

February 9, 2020

Isaiah 58: 1-12

Matthew 5: 13-16

Get Salty

The Reverend Evans McGowan

Ten years ago I was doing graduate work in the Bay Area, working as the Adult Ministries Intern at another First Presbyterian Church, this one in Berkeley. Now to be clear with all of the Michiganders here, there's a Berkeley, California in addition to the Berkeley here in Michigan.

Housing is not cheap in the Bay Area, and my wife and I, after an *entire* one year of marriage, decided to pair up with two other married couples and live together in a 3-bedroom place in North Oakland. We decided to do this intentionally as part of the new monastic movement in the Christian faith; that is, we would share certain things in common, like cooking meals, doing chores, living space, and leading worship and small group time. We created our community after more traditional monastic communities, ones familiar to many in this congregation: Iona in Scotland and Taize in France. These communities and others model themselves on Isaiah 58, incorporating ancient wisdom for the modern world. These communities exist not only to sustain themselves, but also to support the broader community:

To share bread with the hungry,
To shelter the homeless,
To clothe the naked,
And to not hide themselves from each other.

That last one is probably the hardest, as any introvert like me knows living in community. And like any intentional community, we needed a name. After much deliberation, we called ourselves SALT house, which, naturally, stood for: Six Adults Living Together.

Of course, as an intentional faith community, we had these passages from Isaiah and Matthew in mind. In our little corner of Oakland, we aspired to be:

The Repairers of the Breach
The Restorers of the Streets
The Light on the hill...
Indeed, the very *salt of the earth*.

Yet we learned very quickly that it's hard enough to live with someone, let alone SIX ADULTS, and we never really quite realized our dream of affecting change in the neighborhood. We often got stuck on challenges

of our own: Which couple would get the master bedroom? How would we manage dietary restrictions? Who wants cats?

Instead of spreading salt in the neighborhood, we ended up spreading salt on ourselves, getting a little salty with each other. Living and working together is hard work.

On the island of Kauai where I used to live, there is another intentional community called a *hui* whose sole devotion and hard work is *pa'akai*, the Hawaiian word for harvesting salt, which literally means “to solidify the sea.” It takes hard work to get the salt beds ready after the winter storms: The wells and lava tubes must be scrubbed of all dirt, and guarded from any trash dumped nearby. Goopy, black mud must be perfectly smoothed out and allowed to harden without any cracks. The ocean water must be hand-drawn up and warmed in a holding bed (*waiuku*) before being transferred to the beds. Then one must wait as the water evaporates, watching people drive on the beach and erode the protective sand dunes, leaving behind debris and broken glass, and watching helicopter tours nearby kick up dirt into the beds. All of this must be done during the shorter and shorter harvest season, before the winter rains return.

Kuulei Santos, whose family for generations has harvested salt, remarks, “*It’s hard, it’s complicated, but I know if I don’t do it, my kids and their kids won’t be able to continue. And I hope my kids take over my passion - if I had a legacy, I would want it to be that... [for them] to be the keepers of the salt.*”

The keepers of the salt. That’s the legacy she desires for her children.

The late Kobe Bryant now leaves behind his own legacy. When asked about greatness, he responded, “*I think the definition of greatness is to inspire the people next to you... I think that’s our challenge as a people: to figure out how our story impacts others and motivates them to create their own greatness.*”

We have an opportunity to pass on not just our story but God’s story to the next generation, to our children’s children. What do we want to pass on?

What is the salt we are harvesting here in this community? What is the legacy we wish to leave behind?

*Is this not the [salt] that I choose:
To lose the bonds of injustice,
To undo the thongs of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free,
And to break every yoke?*

We Christians often think we’re supposed to be sweet to everyone, but we weren’t called to be the honey of the world. In a culture that sings “pour some sugar on me,” we Christians believe in a rebellious love that calls us to spread some salt in the world.

Y’all, it’s time to get a little salty. I don’t mean salty in the way the world gets angry and indignant over someone shredding paper or not shaking someone’s hand, (or referees making a mistake). I mean...

When a parent makes a racist remark, and a child gets a little salty by saying all of us need to call out racism wherever we see it, even if it’s coming from your own father.



When a gift shop displays dolls of prominent African-Americans hanging from a tree, students at Michigan State get a little salty to improve the awareness of the trials and tribulations of African-Americans in the US, particularly since it's Black History month.

When our county shelters are overflowing in the winter, when there is literally no room at the inn, we along with several other churches in Washtenaw County get a little salty, and open up our buildings and over 100 of us help host our guests.

When there are earthquakes in Puerto Rico, natural disasters in other places, we get a little salty by raising money and sending teams to help in the recovery efforts.

It's time to get salty, y'all!

You see, God does not bless us only to be received in gratitude. God's blessing calls us to act with an attitude of rebellious love.

God blesses us to be brave, to get a little salty as we share the salt of the earth with those who are hungry and thirsty, naked and afraid, homeless and hurting: (the widow and the orphan, the immigrant and the stranger.)

Bryan Stevenson, the civil rights lawyer recently depicted in the book and film Just Mercy, proclaims, "*The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.*"

I ask us all today: How are we treating those who are yearning to break free? What would our community look like if we continually reflected Isaiah 58 and Matthew 5? What would our worship look like? Our faith formation? Our mission activities? What if we acted in light of Isaiah's fast? What if we voted in light of Jesus' blessing?

We are called to stand on the hill of righteousness, as peacemakers and the persecuted, as those poor in spirit and pure in heart, not to blow our trumpets and drown out all others (in pompous self-aggrandizement,) but to simply and courageously shine God's light before others, that they might see our good deeds and not just thank us, but glorify God, the giver of all good gifts.

Lest we lose heart, remember: when we do these things

*Our light shall rise in the darkness [...]
The Lord will guide us continually,
Satisfying our needs in parched places,
And make our bones strong;
And we shall be like a watered garden,
Like a spring of water,*

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*Whose waters never fail.
Our ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
We shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
We shall be called the repairers of the breach,
The restorers of streets to live in.*

If you go looking for Hawaiian salt, know that you can't buy it in the store. If you do find it there, it's probably harvested by machines in Arizona and only packaged in Hawaii. The salt (pictured on the front of the bulletin) can only be given or bartered away: it's a sacred gift, and it's not for sale.

So let's not sell our salt but spread it.

We are the salt of the earth, the gift to the world, carefully crafted to bring out the flavor of love. We are what we love, so let us love those who need a little more salt in their lives, a little more love and grace and truth.

Let's get salty, y'all!

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