

“On Not Becoming Good for Nothing”
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First Congregational Church of Camden

Amos 5: 14-15, 21-24

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live,
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,

just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

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I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them,  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like water

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**Matthew 5: 13**

[Jesus said:]  
“You are the salt of the earth,  
but if salt has lost its taste,  
how can its saltiness be restored?  
It is no longer good for anything  
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”

When we lived on the North Shore of Chicago, I remember, on the drive down to the city, passing by the sign for Morton Salt...the company that invented table salt...is based right there in Chicago....added magnesium carbonate, anti-caking agent....first-ever free-flowing salt hit the market in 1911. You may remember their motto: “when it rains it pours”

Morton salt came late in the game...Salt has a much longer history.

In the ancient world, Salt was an essential ingredient in everyday life...

- as seasoning for food
- as a preservative – in a world before refrigeration, it was critical
- as a disinfectant, a purifier
- it was even used as a fertilizer....

There is a word common to everyday modern language that serves as a reminder of the value of salt...it's the word SALARY...which from the Latin word SALARIUM...which comes from the Latin word for SALT: SAL. A 'salarium' designated a Roman Soldier's allowance to buy salt...no doubt where the saying that a person is "worth his salt..." comes from.

**It's more than likely that Jesus had the worship life of the Jewish people in mind...**

As you know, central to the worship life of the Jewish people from the earliest of days, was the practice of sacrifice...of making offerings to God—meal offering and also burnt offerings of various animals...such sacrifices were acts of dedication and thanksgiving...making a connection between heaven and earth, God's existence and ours....

*Here's the connection:*

Salt was always used in the making of these offerings to God—an essential and final ingredient...as a symbol of the "ETERNAL DURATION OF THE COVENANT between God and God's PEOPLE"...binding things on earth to things in heaven...making the connection to something higher, enduring, and transcendent that brings value, meaning, purpose, righteousness, justice...to the earth.

Even though the practice of sacrifice ceased long ago in the worship life of the Jewish Community...they have not lost the significance of salt...

**At the traditional weekly Shabbat meal the host dips the bread into salt before serving it.**

As one rabbi explained this practice:

*If the table is like the altar, the food eaten upon it is like the offerings. As it says in the Torah, in book of Leviticus, With regard to the offerings, the verse states, You shall not omit the salt of your G-d's covenant from [being placed] upon your meal offerings. You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices."*

Because of its significance, the Rabbis likened the Torah to it; for as the world could not do without salt, neither could it do without the Torah. As salt preserves food...just as the Torah preserves life.

*YOU are the salt of the earth*, the rabbi Jesus said.

You are a sign of GOD's COVENANT...you are holding the line between heaven and earth...  
You are a people of consequence for the sake of the world.

'You are the salt of the earth;

Notice this...Jesus takes 7 words to say who we are...  
and 28 words to warn against what we must NOT BECOME:

*but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

It is not a given that we will be who we are...

We can become utterly inconsequential

We can cease to be what God and the world need us to be.

As one preacher said:  
"the church all too often looks like the bland leading the bland."  
Luke has another, more explicit version of this warning....

*Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; they throw it away.*

That's a jarring image...who would have thought that there was such a short distance from the ALTAR to the MANURE PILE??

You can't help but hear the words of AMOS tolling the background...

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

We can lose our way...  
We can become good for nothing...

One of the sociologists I have been reading of late writes about that a growing experience people have in late modern life is that we have a sense for what is good...we just don't get around to doing it.

Don't have time...demands of everyday life don't allow us to get to the things we think really matter.

When Jesus talked about a loss of faith, he didn't talk about dramatic turnings, but quiet, creeping detachment and indifference...less like turning against something and more like nodding off. "Stay awake!" "Wake up!" were imperatives he delivered often to his followers. (Aside: Was Jesus was the first advocate of 'wokeness'? Something to contemplate.)

Have you ever noticed how injustice and oppression always appears so absolutely obvious and so utterly. unmistakable... *in hindsight?*

Thomas Hobbes once said, "Hell is truth seen too late."

In the verses preceding and following our Reading from Matthew 5, Jesus has a lot to say about what a people who are worth their salt looked like:

- they are known for their mercy
- their practice of forgiveness
- their humility
- their generosity
- their hunger and thirst for justice
- their truthfulness
- their peacemaking

- their love of enemies...
- their turning of the other cheek..
- as those who do unto other as they would have others do unto them..

Such a way of life, while often and by most is regarded as noble and even admirable

Such as way of life is widely regarded as

naïve

impractical

utterly unworkable in the REAL world.

And therefore, justifiably dismissed...as a way of life...

But there is another way this way of life is dismissed... a more subtle way: not by rejecting it...but by redefining what this way of life means. Such as...

*Peace* must come through strength...

peace only comes by way of violence or the threat of violence

peace becomes compatible with revenge and retribution..

*Justice* is measured by what it good for JUST US

*Generosity* is for those who deserve it, who have paid their dues.

*Love* is what we owe to those who are directly related to us or at least are LIKE us. Compassion becomes a form of what someone I read this week termed “narcissistic compassion”—a form of compassion evoked much more by calamities striking “people like us” than to people we have come to identify, for whatever reason, as “not one of us.” We lose our capacity to “put ourselves in another’s shoes.” We don’t stop caring...we just draw the circle of caring and loving much tighter, closer to home.

We keep the form of this life but lose its content:

The salt loses its saltiness.

You, Jesus said, will stand as a witness against such blandness...

otherwise, what are you good for?

Several years ago, while I was serving a congregation in in Illinois, Ali Abu Awwad visited our congregation. Ali is a Palestinian and has spent his whole life on the West Bank.....is the Founding leader of an organization known as Tagh-yeer (*Change*), a Palestinian National Nonviolence Movement. In 2023 an international jury awarded Ali the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development.

The award recognized for “outstanding efforts in bringing together the youth and peoples of Israel and the Arab World for a non-violent resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict...”

Well into his late 20’s. Ali was involved in acts of resistance against the Government of Israel’s occupation...

- his mother imprisoned,
- he himself was shot,
- his brother shot and killed at a checkpoint by an Israeli soldier..
- and Ali was imprisoned for 4 years...

Ali talks of being filled with rage and revenge and hatred...through a series of experiences he became a voice and activist for non violence and reconciliation...he talks of a moment of transformation when he saw Jewish tears...the tears of Jewish mothers who, like his mother, had lost a child in the conflict...their heart too were broken... the real enemy, the common enemy was fear.

Ali's home has become a haven for Israel- Palestinian reconciliation. Just south of Bethlehem, there was a field owned by the Awwad family for decades, but had been largely neglected. He moved there in January 2014 with a dream of creating a Palestinian center for the study of nonviolence. Ali's land is now simply called "The Field," People come from near and far...activities are held outside on worn couches under a tarp for shade...there Palestinians and Jews sit together on plastic lawn chairs and the worn couches to talk and to listen and to come to understandings that make for peace and reconciliation.

In 2017 I visited Ali's "Field" with a group from my congregation in Illinois...we met with Shaul David Judelman, an orthodox Jew who lived in a nearby settlement there on the West Bank. He talked with us of how Palestinians and Jews are waging peace and reconciliation in the midst of enmity and conflict.

In a world in which so much and so many tempt us to believe there is no choice...Ali and his friends—both Jews and Palestinians—were making a choice...

*Naive, impractical, unrealistic, unworkable?*  
Not so much.

I remember that day...there was an unmistakable taste the salt in the air.

*You are the salt of the earth. Amen.*