

5 Epiphany YA 2023

All y'all's Salt
By the Rev. Salying Wong

When I was in southern Ethiopia, driving through the countryside, I saw little huts built low and close to the ground. Each hut had a pile of black cow patties, stacked neatly beside the hut. I could also see that there were patties placed in the sun. Our driver explained that the cow patties were dried and used for fuel. So instead of a wood pile for fuel, there was a cow pattie pile. In a place without electricity or pipes for natural gas, what the cows deposited was a reliable source of fuel.

So many things I saw in Ethiopia reminded me of first century Palestine, like leprosy, which was still around. But I learned another thing this week when Lou Poulain forwarded to me an article on the enigmatic saying in today's gospel, "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."

In Hebrew, many words have double meanings. In the article, I learned that the word "earth", besides referring to the world, was also the word for the earthen ovens used to cook in first century Palestine. The source of fuel for these earthen ovens was salted camel or donkey patties. Before the patties were dried, salt was mixed into them to act as a catalyst for fire. An additional slab of salt was placed under the patty and the whole thing was burned till the salt's catalytic function was exhausted. The exhausted salt was garbage and thrown away.

As a one-time chemist, I really appreciate the ingenuity of this. A catalyst makes reactions efficient. So, the salt facilitated a cleaner and hotter burning of the methane in the patties for the earthen ovens. With this in mind, what do you hear now when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." What, we are mixed

with poo? Well, there is that. But, putting aside the smelly nature of the metaphor, I am thinking of the collective power of salt grains to heat an oven—an oven that enables people to cook, to keep warm, and to light up the night. I remember growing up in China, we had a open hearth, much like the clay oven. Each day, much of the time was consumed looking for fuel. The hearth was so important. It was warm, nourishment, security and joy. Imagine, then, being thought of salt that facilitates those who gather to experience warmth, nourishment, security and joy. Imagine, those who cannot see come to the fire to get light. This leads us directly into the next saying, “You are the light of the world.” The saying is meant to be heard together: You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. These are not two random sayings that ended up together.

I am also thinking about how Jesus likes to use metaphors of the small to be the agent of God’s work. Like, leaven in bread, like the mustard seed, and the pearl of great price, salt as grains or a collection of grains in a slab can work are about the unexpected ways God’s power shows up. Salvation is so gentle and quiet—you can miss it if you’re not paying attention.

Now, I bring your attention to the the word “you” here. It is you-plural. “Y’all are the salt of the earth; y’all are the light of the world.” All y’all.

Even as Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven and the cost of engaging the beatitudes, he says, “You can’t do it alone.” This isn’t a path for individual enlightenment and actualization. This is for community. All y’all are the salt of the earth; all y’all are the light of the world. We put forth heat and light *together*.

At the vestry retreat, we spent time praying and meditating on building community and making connections. That is, we were pondering how to fish for people, as Jesus had promised we would do if we followed him. We know it is not an individual project. If you saw our list of Task Forces and the work ahead of us, you know we act together to do a good thing for God. It is when we think it is the work of one person or one small group or one small ministry that we get into

trouble. This is when our righteousness goes sideways and it does not exceed that of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were the most holy people in Israel. They studied the law and obeyed the law and taught others. But our gospel writer is having a disagreement with the synagogues and are now using the Pharisees as a trope for narrow followers of the law who use their devotion to show off their moral goodness. We will hear this caricature played out in an outrageous way in the reading on Ash Wednesday, when a Pharisee prays by thanking God for how wonderful he is compared to the tax collector.

The truth is this caricature of the Pharisees is a reality within us. It is so easy to use good works to point to ourselves rather than God. “Why am I the only one who cares about the poor?” “Without me, this ministry would fail.” “If others don’t do what I do, they are not following the gospel!” But the salt is a catalyst. It is not the source of heat nor the light. Rather, the salt serves the heat and the light. And when we point away from ourselves to God, then we exceed the caricature of the Pharisee’s righteousness.

Because we love God and God’s people, we aim to be humble salt. Each one, like a grain, nothing in itself. But together, lifting up the contribution of each one of us, we can assist the people to know the warmth of God, the nourishment of God. Together, we can light up the world.