**Being Salt and Light**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

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Scripture: Matt. 5:13-20, 1 Cor. 1:1-7

Did you know that there is a cathedral in Colombia made almost entirely out of salt and light? It’s true. About 50 kilometres north of the capital, Bogota, in the town of Zipaquira, a former salt mine has been converted into a Roman Catholic cathedral {slide 1}. {slide 2} As you enter, the arching passage takes you 200 metres underground, where coloured lights glance off of the crystals in the salt-streaked rock, creating a stunning, iridescent glow. As you move along the passage, there are a number of chapels representing Jesus’ life as well as the stations of the cross, complete with sculptures and crosses carved out of the salty rock – I have a few examples here {slides 3-6}. And at the end of the passage, you find the cavernous sanctuary, with its huge, jagged walls lit in various colours {slides 7-10}. The site is a destination for Christian pilgrimages and thousands of people flock there to worship on Sundays, finding sacred space in the striking combination of salt and light {slide 11}.

Was this cathedral literally made from salt and light what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of these things in his Sermon on the Mount? Probably not. But what a beautiful and profoundly inspiring symbol for the calling of the church – that is, the *people* of God, the church *community* – to be the salt of the earth and light for the world!

As a fresh-faced undergraduate at Canadian Mennonite University, taking my first Bible and theology courses, I remember being so inspired by Anabaptist Mennonite “ecclesiology” – or how our Mennonite tradition understands the church. A line from well-known Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder has stayed with me: he writes, “The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This line is admittedly less vivid and imagination-grabbing than Jesus’ rich metaphors of salt and light, but it’s a kind of distillation of the same idea: the church is called to lend its flavour to the earth and its light to the world, to be a foretaste of the Reign of God, to light the way toward its coming in full. In other words, the church is a taste or glimpse of what’s to come as God’s way is followed on earth.

 Like other Mennonite theologians, Yoder paints an idyllic picture of the church as an exemplary community, a community in which believers forgive one another, hold one another accountable in love, share what they have with one another, overcome divisions of ethnicity, gender, and class, and contribute to the life of the community, each according to his or her gifts. It’s a beautiful image! I also remember learning that in the Christian debates about whether it’s actually possible to follow Jesus and live according to God’s will, our Mennonite tradition comes out firmly on the optimistic side. No, we argued, sin does not completely taint human existence, making it impossible to truly live out our faith in the here and now. No, we don’t have to wait until the kingdom or kindom of God comes in full or until everyone and everything is reconciled to God. It is possible to live as God wants us to, to follow the peaceful way of Jesus, because God makes us into a holy community. Sin doesn’t have the last word, but God’s work in us sanctifies us, makes us holy.

Of course, Mennonites didn’t just come up with this stuff out of thin air – the apostle Paul speaks about much the same thing in the opening of his First Letter to the Corinthians which we heard read this morning. He speaks of the Corinthians as those who have been “sanctified,” even going so far as to call them “saints”! He speaks about the grace of God which has “enriched” the Corinthians with “spiritual gifts,” saying, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind […] so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 4-5, 7). In other words, even in waiting for God’s Reign to come in full, the early church understood that it “was not lacking in any spiritual gift” – it was *already* sanctified, *already* a community of saints or holy ones. Isn’t that a powerful, empowering, and encouraging notion?

 Well, it is encouraging, but it’s also, as you might be thinking, a rather tall order.

At the same time as I was being inspired by theological ideas of the church as a holy community, I remember looking at the real, flesh-and-blood church and being – well, disappointed. Petty squabbles, power struggles, and a slowness to forgive seemed just as evident within the church as outside of it. And when it came to offering hospitality, alleviating suffering or standing up for peace and justice, too often the church is hesitant to act or speak out. I was left wondering, so why doesn’t the church act like the sacred community it supposedly is? In other words, why does it squander its flavour and hide its light away? I have to admit that during that time of my life, I started to feel quite disconnected from the church, and stopped attending regularly, even though church had formerly been a place of belonging – a home – for me.

 And I’m certainly not the only committed Christian for whom the relationship with the church has been a little bit rocky. In her book, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, Rachel Held Evans speaks of her experiences as a teen who enthusiastically belonged in her church to a twenty-something who could no longer swallow the platitudes her church taught about strict gender roles, creationism, hell, and the supposed ‘wrongness’ of homosexuality.[[2]](#footnote-2) Eventually, she and her husband Dan decided to leave the congregation, feeling betrayed by the church, especially by its homophobia. After years of searching, including finding community through blogging, a silent retreat at a monastery, and an experimental church plant, Rachel and Dan eventually found a church home at an Episcopal congregation, a much more liturgical tradition than the evangelicalism they had grown up in.

 Rachel is often asked why millennials – people in their twenties and thirties – are leaving the church, and this is her response: “Millennials want to be known by what we’re for, I said, not just what we’re against. We don’t want to choose between science and religion or between our intellectual integrity and our faith. Instead, we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it’s uncomfortable. We want to talk through the tough stuff – biblical interpretation, religious pluralism, sexuality, racial reconciliation, and social justice – but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers. We want to bring our whole selves through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask.” She talks about this not as “a *hipper* Christianity,” but a “*truer*,” “more *authentic* Christianity.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

 So how has she come to terms with the church despite her disillusionment at how *inauthentic* it can be? (She jokes that someone suggested an alternate, more cynical title for her book: *“Jesus Went Back to Heaven and All He Left Me Was This Lousy Church*”!) Well, she ends up talking about the church as mother, saying, “despite its persistent wanderings and betrayals, the church births us and feeds us and names us children of God.” This is not an idealized view of motherhood, though; she reminds us that “with new life comes swollen breasts, dry heaves, dirty diapers, snotty noses, late night arguments, and a whole army of new dangers and fears she never even considered before because life-giving isn’t nearly as glamorous as it sounds, but it’s a thousand times more beautiful.” She concludes that we need to “tell ourselves the truth” about the church – “acknowledging its scars, staring down the ugly bits, marveling at its resiliency, and believing that this flawed and magnificent body is enough, for now, to carry us through the world and into the arms of Christ.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

 Another example of a complicated relationship with church can be found in the experience of German theologian and peace activist Dorothee Soelle, who experienced a similar tension to Rachel Held Evans. She speaks of the church as traitor and the church as sister. While I always find myself wincing at this statement, and wondering whether it’s really appropriate to call the church a “traitor,” it’s important to look at her context. Soelle grew up in Nazi Germany, and she applauds the churches that resisted the Nazis, often at great risk to themselves. Her own family hid a Jewish woman in their attic for a time, as did other Christians; this form of the church is the church as sister, the church which remains faithful to its difficult calling. But she also notes that for all of those churches which resisted the Nazis, many more supported or at least remained silent in the face of the Nazi agenda. In this light, the language of the church as “traitor” doesn’t seem too strong after all. And according to Soelle, there are modern-day versions of this manifestation of the church, anytime it forges alliances with “money and military power.” She writes, “again and again [it] betrays its own truth. In a biblical image, the church is often like Judas, who delivered Jesus to the established religious authorities. Or is it more like the male disciples, who discouraged and defeated, left Jesus alone and fled? And then there are times when the thought overtakes me that the church is like Peter, who denied that he had ever known anything at all about peace and justice. Very rarely do I see the church, like him, weeping bitter tears.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

I think Held Evans and Soelle have a lot to teach us about both embracing and being honest about the church. There are ways in which I do see the church being salt and light, but even in those instances, it’s never pure. For me, the church is salt and light when it overcomes gender divisions and discrimination, when it recognizes and values women’s voices and gifts. There are many churches that live out the conviction that all of us are created in the image of the divine, and that in Christ there is no male or female, as it says in Galatians. For me, as a woman, to stand in this pulpit this morning might seem ordinary in this congregation, where there have been female pastors for decades, but it’s no small thing. Too often, the church betrays the holy egalitarianism to which it’s called, and thereby denies its saltiness and hides its light. Another way in which the church is called to be salt and light for me is in its peace theology. From Jesus’ ministry of peacemaking and nonviolence to the examples of the early Anabaptists, Christian history is full of courageous people who trusted in God instead of in the power of violence. And in the present day, there are many Christians working to end violence and build peace. Organizations like Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams give me profound hope for the church and challenge me to take risks for the sake of peace. But even in our Mennonite peace tradition, we have too often fallen short in defining peace too narrowly. I’m thinking especially of the shameful legacy John Howard Yoder left behind: even though he was one of the major voices of promoting Mennonite peace theology, he was himself sexually abusive, something which the Mennonite church failed to treat as a peace issue and covered up for much too long. In these ways, the church is both faithful sister or mother and heartless traitor of its call to peacemaking. Finally, I see the church as salt and light in its efforts to be inclusive – to embrace diversity and unity, especially among people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Our passage from Matthew 5 on salt and light was actually the scripture chosen for the ecumenical Pride worship service about a month ago. Reverend Laura Fouse, one of the ministers at McClure United Church, spoke about this passage in light of the experiences of LGBTQ Christians, who have so often been told by the church that they do not belong and that they should hide their saltiness and their light from the world. Instead, she encouraged LGBTQ Christians to let go of shame over who they are and to “let their light shine before others,” for they, too, “are the light of the world” and the “salt of the earth.” What an inspiring interpretation of this well-worn passage. I personally find in LGBTQ Christians’ embrace of the church a radical example of grace, as the church becomes a place of community, support, and belonging rather than hurt and rejection.

 So what does this duplicity mean for the church’s ability to be salt and light? Is it ultimately impossible or naive? This is a common response to hopeful talk about the church. Over the years, Mennonites have faced accusations of naivete for speaking about the church as a community which exemplifies the peace of Christ, and Soelle recounts that she was also asked, “But you do not really mean the church when you talk like this?” She would reply, “‘Yes indeed, that is how I imagine the church, and occasionally, that is how I experience it.’… I pray that this is what the church might be.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

 This also seems to be what Paul prayed the church might be millennia ago. The lofty opening of 1st Corinthians might suggest a perfect, saintly community. Well, no such luck! As you may recall, the rest of the letter actually reads more like a long list of scandals: believers are divided on whether they follow Jesus or Paul, someone is in a sexual relationship with his step-mother, believers are suing one another in court, people are eating food offered to idols, people are either going hungry or getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper, and so on. This is hardly an exemplary community! And yet THESE are the people whom Paul calls saints?! There must be some mistake!

 But, remarkably, Paul does call them saints, and he speaks about it in the present tense. He doesn’t stipulate that once they work out these numerous serious issues, then they’ll be worthy to be called saints or holy ones. Instead, at the very beginning of the letter, he already calls them saints, and says they’re not lacking in any spiritual gifts. The implication is that they’ve already been sanctified by God, they’re already saints, so they might as well start acting like it! There’s nothing holding them back from living as a holy community right now.

The immediacy of it is striking, and it’s mirrored in Matthew, where Jesus uses the present tense as well: “You *are* the salt of the earth,” he states. “You *are* the light of the world.” He doesn’t say, “you will be” salt or “you will be” light. He doesn’t even say, “you used to be salt and light, and have to recover that.” No, we already are salt and light, right now, in the present. So in that sense, it’s not naïve to expect us to behave as such, as Jesus and Paul encourage us to do. In fact, it’s ridiculous to waste our saltiness and squander our light! The problem isn’t that we’re not good enough to be called salt and light, or that we’re unworthy to be called saints. We, the church, are salt and light, and are sanctified. Even our shortcomings and downright betrayals of our calling can’t undo its hold on us: we’re still called and enabled to do the good work of being salt and light.

I think the salt cathedral has one final insight to offer. It’s remarkable that such a hidden place draws so many people to its doors; in other words, even though it’s hidden deep underground, it’s still a beacon of faith; from a place of darkness, it still shines and inspires believers through God’s grace. That’s how it is with us as well. Even though we may try to hide our light and deny our flavour, God finds a way for them to come through, for the church today to take the shape of things to come.

So let’s live out our indelible identity. Nothing is holding us back, so let’s go be salt and light, making the world a little more delicious and a little more beautiful, through God’s wide love. AMEN

1. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1992) , ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Santa Rosa, CA: Nelson Books, 2015), 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Held Evans, xiii-xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Held Evans, 254, 248-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Martin and Barbara Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 25, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Soelle, 94-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)