

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Kingdom ways: giving flavor; clarifying the view**

*Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 5:13-20*

This week I had two very different opportunities to savor some new flavors and see things through a slightly different lens. On Wednesday I was at Luther Seminary for their mid-winter convocation. It's an event much like the Pastors Week that I attended the previous couple years at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, only I didn't run into anyone I knew like I do when I go to Elkhart. Lutheran pastors know how to sing and I could have almost imagined myself in a Mennonite gathering if I had closed my eyes, but the jokes were about grace and works righteousness, so I knew I was among Lutherans. The group was almost exclusively white, predominantly male and average age over 50. The keynote speaker was William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop from the south who is considered one of the top ten preachers in the country today and who is one of the most-read Christian theological authors. That's a good thing since he's written over 50 books. It would be a shame to write so prolifically and not have anyone read your writing!

On Thursday evening and Friday morning I was at the Hilton in downtown Minneapolis for "Making Change," the national conference on LGBT Equality. There the crowd was decidedly younger and culturally diverse. Instead of suits and Scandinavian sweaters, there were colorful T-shirts, buttons, and hair of many colors, cuts and styles. During the opening ceremony many of the people danced their way to the lectern and the crowd was quick to shout out, stand and applaud to show their engagement. One of the tracks of this year's conference was a faith-based track, "Practice Spirit, Do Justice." That theme was featured centrally in the opening plenary on Thursday night when a panel comprised of gay and lesbian religious leaders—Muslim, Christian, Jewish, from various ethnic backgrounds—spoke of the intersection of their faith journeys and their work for lgbt justice.

Both of these gatherings were intended to refresh, renew, and sharpen the vision and message of those in attendance. Both called those in attendance to be salt and light. At Luther Seminary the speakers spoke of the church's task of using scripture in moral deliberation. In one of the workshops I attended at Creating Change, we discussed ways to engage and speak empathically with persons who read, understand, and use scripture in ways different from our own, particularly when it comes to topics of sexuality. On Wednesday I was with pastors who no doubt understand themselves as servants yet work within the heart of power in the church. On Friday I was with people who have often been relegated to the margins of the church, if they've been welcomed at all. Both groups shared biblical stories that inspire, give hope, and courage.

In both of these places I tasted salt—just the right amount—that enticed me to want more—to dig deeper into scripture and to seek to "loose the bonds of injustice"—those eloquent words from the prophet Isaiah in our reading this morning. In both places I gained new clarity from the wisdom, experience, and dedicated work of theologians and scholars, and of organizers and activists. It wasn't hard to imagine Jesus in either of those settings, but I'm guessing he might have had more fun at "Creating Change"!

Now Jesus wasn't about change just because he had nothing better to do than shake up the status quo. Jesus was about changing the structures and circumstances that kept people from experiencing the full love of God and the shared love of God in the Beloved Community. When Jesus began his ministry he quoted words from Isaiah similar to those we read this morning, defining his call as one that liberates, that lifts up. In the Sermon on the Mount, he had the

audacity to announce that liberation, hope, and comfort were at hand—that God’s kingdom had drawn near.

One might get the impression, from the Beatitudes we read last Sunday...Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn...that our role in God’s kingdom is passive. We’ll be comforted; we’ll be satisfied; we’ll inherit the earth. But the promise of a new, dawning reality that the beatitudes pointed toward were the impetus for today’s verses giving Jesus’ followers an active role: we are salt; we are light! The things we do and say, the way we live, make a difference!

But what does this difference look like? How do salt and light work? Salt is so ordinary we hardly give it much thought. It’s just there. Unlike other seasonings that we might keep inside a cupboard and only use on occasion with particular recipes; salt often sits on the stovetop, close at hand so we can put a bit in almost everything we make. We don’t want salt to be the dominant flavoring agent, but just the right amount makes all the difference. And salt isn’t just for flavor. It regulates the fluid content of our bodies. It preserves food. It has curative qualities as in salt gargles and nasal cleansers.

Light, too, is an ordinary thing that we often take for granted. We expect some degree of natural light during the daytime. From earliest time, humans have manufactured ways to illuminate the darkness, beginning with fire, then oil lamps and candles, then gas lights. With the invention of electricity we’ve had incandescent, florescent, and light-emitting diodes (LED) bulbs. Some of us benefit from full-spectrum lights during winter months in the northern hemisphere. And in some places mirrors are used to help disseminate light.

When Jesus calls us to be salt and light then, we’re called to be ordinary. We’re called to do things that won’t necessarily stand out but will make all the difference. And just as there are various forms of salt – sea salt, refined salt, iodized salt—and many forms of light, there is no *single, right way* to be salt and light in the world. Sometimes the light that is needed is the comforting glow of a candle. Sometimes the light that is needed is the clarity of a spot light.

This week I have been reflecting on salt and light in relation to our discussion last week about the “Phoenix decision” – whether or not to hold our denominational assembly in Arizona in 2013. Kim Vu Friesen, a member of the executive board of Mennonite Church USA, told us how excruciating the decision was. Clearly many people are disappointed, even angry, with the decision to go to Phoenix. But I have a growing sense that there was not *one right decision* or that our church leaders were simply spineless and got it wrong. Each of the options—to go or to boycott—offered opportunities for solidarity and witness and painful costs, relational and financial.

Jesus followed up his declaration that children of God’s kingdom are salt and light with a discussion about the meaning of his ministry in relation to the “law and the prophets” – the two primary Jewish theological traditions. He said he wasn’t here to take away from those traditions but rather to fulfill them. He called his followers to be expansive in their pursuit of justice, not like the Pharisees who had everything pinned down. They didn’t have to deliberate or agonize over thorny decisions; they were sure they had it all figured out.

There is no better place to orient ourselves to our calling to be salt and light than at the table of the Lord. The table reminds us of Jesus’ agonizing decision to go to Jerusalem, the heart of imperial occupation and conflict. He went, despite the protests of his disciples, and our lives are forever changed.

Let us pray: (#697 HWB)