**February 9, 2020**

**Matthew 5:13-20**

This was the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He sat down on the hill, surrounded by his disciples and ordinary followers, and began to preach. “Blessed are the meek… Blessed are the peacemakers… Blessed are… Blessed are…” all those people who are lowly and suffering and less-than. Blessed are. Then “you are.” You are meant to be the blessing to those people. You are meant to serve those people.

For, you are… salt. Salt flavors whatever it touches. So you are meant to flavor the world with who you are (a child of God and a disciple of Christ). You are meant to spread your message wherever you go. But if *salt* loses its taste, how can its taste be restored? When *you* lose this message – when you lose the essence of who you are (a child of God and a disciple of Christ), how can you restore it? How can you reclaim your message? how can you restore core pieces of who you are?

The thing that I have spent the most time wrestling in my tenure as pastor here is trying to articulate the essence of Sweet Hollow. Who *are* you? Who are we? What is our flavor? We say that we are a big-hearted church, but how do visitors see us? How do hungry neighbors experience us? (As Desmond Tutu famously said, “Every church should get a letter of recommendation from the poor in their community.”) We say that we are a family-friendly church. So what do our children say? What do our parents say? We say that we are Christians. So how do we practice our faith? How do we show our faith beyond this hour each week? beyond these doors? What is the essence of who we are? What is our flavor?

Over the past five years we have practiced discernment, intentionally thinking about our history. We recognized past successes in Sunday School and choirs and large pageants and plays. We admitted past challenges and failures in the closing of the church before World War II. We admitted bullying behavior by certain members, staff, and church officers. We practiced intentional discernment about our current situation, reestablishing the children’s Sunday School as well as occasional adult educational activities. Due to a widespread feeling of fatigue amongst our members, we discerned a need for smaller committee structure and fewer church officers. And yet, even in the midst of all this significant discernment, we have struggled to articulate what (beyond our building and property) defines us. Officers and members alike have had a difficult time putting words around the essence of Sweet Hollow and how God can best use our flavor in the world. Because of this uncertainty, our congregation’s future is at stake. We are not confident about what God is calling us to do next.

When Jesus’ first disciples left their fishing boats, they followed him into uncertain futures. They followed Christ without knowing where they would be fed or how they would afford that meal. They followed Christ away from all that was safe and familiar and into a strange new way of being in the world. In doing so, the disciples made an intentional choice to lose themselves in Christ’s teachings. They chose *not* to do what they were comfortable doing, or be with those who were comfortable, or even do what they chose to do for themselves. Instead, when they became Christ’s disciples, they chose to learn and love boldly, widely, and deeply, re-flavoring the world around them with *Jesus’* saltiness (not their own). And so they did. They traveled to different communities. They told neighbors and strangers about Jesus and his teachings. As they went, as they salted the way, they grew Christ’s church from a dozen to hundreds to millions.

Our identity at Sweet Hollow is first and foremost that of being Christian. Then what we do should be shaped by that identity, not by our personal preferences. Who we are is directly tied to what we do (which, in Christianity, is labelled “discipleship”). How we practice discipleship then salts – flavors – the world. When we are generous, we give abundantly because God gave us abundant goodness. When we are loving, we care for neighbors and strangers because God first loved us. When we are *not* generous, however, our desire to keep things for ourselves models to the world a thing that is *not* from God. When we are *not* loving, we further deny the world the light that is so greatly needed. Our discipleship has a direct impact on the world around us – their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

James K.A. Smith wrote that “Discipleship… is a way to curate your heart, to be intentional about what you love.” [[1]](#footnote-1) The moment we claimed God’s love for ourselves, the moment we named ourselves “Christian,” we were invited to daily intentionality in all that we say and do. For in order to love God with our whole heart and mind and strength, we must be intentional. It doesn’t just happen. Too many things compete for pieces of our heart and mind and strength.

If we at Sweet Hollow are going to be Christ’s disciples, if we are going to be intentional, we must do the work of regular discernment and spiritually audit ourselves. Just like we audit our income and expenses every year around tax season, we must do the equivalent work spiritually to see how we are taking in the salt of the earth, and how we are spreading out the salt of the earth. When we name the spiritual food that nourishes us (a particular scripture or worship service or love or kindness received from someone), we are spiritually auditing ourselves. Like when we thought about our call stories a few weeks ago – the people and experiences that salted and flavored our faith. Then we practice discipleship when we take the salt they shared, the flavors they stirred within our hearts, and turn it around and salt the world with God’s goodness: generosity, love, kindness and gentleness. We practice intentionality when we ask ourselves “what flavors are we spreading around -- Christ’s or something else?”

Discipleship doesn’t come easy. Intentional faith practice doesn’t just happen – even for those who would be faith leaders or greats. As Jesus spoke, he made clear divisions between the righteous and unrighteous, the blessed and the cursed, the salted and the unpalatable. Jesus frequently talked about the scribes and the Pharisees as what his disciples should *not* be; they were the low bar. Jesus continually tried to redirect his disciples in his teachings and practices. Don’t be like them; be salt, be light, be blessed.

How do we set the bar? How do we raise the bar? The Session is the bar for the congregation. We will be as salty as they are. If the Session and church officers are content to maintain the *status quo*, then that is what a congregation does. But if the Session pushes the church to be missional and hands-on and constantly reaching and stretching, then that is what a congregation does.

Pastors and church secretaries are another bar for a congregation. And let me tell you that our new church administrator, Lori, raised our bar. Because *she* is willing and capable, we will do more. Our salt will stretch farther. Our light will grow brighter.

We are not meant to keep our light to ourselves. We are not meant to limit its possibilities or be judicious in the way that we flavor the world with God’s salt. Salt and light do not exist for themselves, but serve others. The work they do is dependent upon understanding their essence. If salt loses its flavor, if light loses its shine, how can they be restored? They are thrown out. As Meister Eckhart wrote in the 13th century, “The outward work will never be puny if the inward work is great. And the outward work can never be great or even good if the inward work is puny or of little worth.” What’s inside is out. But we have to know what’s inside to put it to work.

 Jesus calls the disciples “salt” to flavor the world around them with faith. We can only do so when we understand who we are. One of my favorite mystics, Terea of Avila wrote in *The Way of Perfection*: “Almost all problems in the spiritual life stem from a lack of self-knowledge.” We must continue intentionally discerning who we are and who God calls us to be tomorrow. In order to flavor the world with God’s goodness, in order to shine Christ’s light in a needy world, in order to not be good for nothing and thrown out, we must continue asking hard questions of who we are and how we can be faithful disciples.

 Our church officers have their annual training and visioning meeting today. Please pray for us as we continue asking, “Who is Sweet Hollow?” and “What is God calling us to do today – tomorrow – with the salt and light we’ve been given?” How can we best serve God by serving others in the world? May God grant us wisdom and courage in answering these questions.

1. You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit [↑](#footnote-ref-1)