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## *Salt, Light, and Righteousness*

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler  
For Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio  
The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany<sup>™</sup> Year A  
Matthew 5:13-20**

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world," and then he said, a little while later, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:13-20). I want to speak this morning about salt, about light, and about righteousness.

I can understand how Jesus told his disciples that they were salt. If you taste someone, or lick their skin, odds are you will taste salt. And salt is a preservative, isn't it? There is something in its chemical composition that actually slows the deterioration of organic cells. We, too, are meant to be salty preservers of life. And, of course, salt is a great spicy mineral. Some of us are spicier than others, but I give thanks for the people who really do bring salt to the table. Salty tales are the best, and they last a long time.

But Jesus also told his disciples that they were light. I have always been a little skeptical of that claim. Oh, I know some of us are light. Some of you, when you walk into the room, you brighten up the place, like the sun! Back in my home parish, in Atlanta, just this past Thursday, I officiated at a funeral for a man like that. He really was light in the world; in God's cleverness, my parishioner actually ran a very successful lighting store called Georgia Lighting.

Some of us, I am sad to admit, don't always give off light. And some people actually suck up light. They are like black holes. When they walk into a room, all the energy just sort of gets sucked out of the room. One of my friends said this, one time, about such a person: "When he walks into a room, it feels like somebody just left."

Most of us, probably, are in between. We are not always the Sun, but we are not Black Holes either. We are something in between I guess. We are the earthen vessels that St. Paul speaks of in Second Corinthians, chapter four. We are the light of the world, but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, clay jars, pieces of pottery that crack and break quite often.

Simply put, we are not perfect, or perfected, yet. And so I offer this morning, once again, the words you are fully expecting if you know I am a fan of Leonard Cohen and that I am presenting him today. Many of you know these lines:

*Ring the bells that still can ring,  
Forget your perfect offering,  
There is a crack, a crack, in everything.  
That's how the light gets in.* (from *Anthem*, by Leonard Cohen)

Those words ring true over and over again. When we are embarrassed about what we might offer the world, or offer God, or much more usually, embarrassed about what we might offer our children or our lover. Often, we simply do not have the perfect offering.

Forget it, says Cohen. Be for real. There is a crack in everything. In fact, that's how the light gets in.

It may just be, however, how that the cracks are how the light gets out, too. It is when people see our weakness, our woundedness, even our pain and brokenness, that they can also see God's grace, God's light, in our lives.

I am here to appreciate Leonard Cohen today because he shows us the salt and the light of humanity in the very cracks and edges of our lives that make us real. Leonard Cohen writes material which is similar to what biblical scholars call "wisdom literature," the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Solomon. Especially those last two. Leonard Cohen is the writer of Ecclesiastes and The Song of Solomon in our time. Light and salt: You can see it, you can taste it. Light as the Breeze.

Being salt and light in the world, representing the spice and the energy of Christ, does not mean avoiding suffering and even despair. Cohen, a sort of Jewish Buddhist mystic, knows much about the suffering of Jesus Christ, too, the Christ who, in the New Testament completes the character of the Old Testament Job.

In *Suzanne*, Cohen wrote about Jesus that "he himself was broken, forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone." Fifty years later, still writing, Cohen wrote a song called *Show Me the Place*, in which we hear,

*Show me the place where the Word became a man,  
Show me the place where the suffering began  
, The troubles came, I saved what I could save  
A thread of light, a particle, a wave ,  
Show me the place where the Word became a man,  
Show me the place where the suffering began.*

(from *Show Me The Place*, Leonard Cohen)

I salute the threads of light that shine out from the tattered edges and holes of our lives, and I salute the particles and waves of light that enter us through our wounds. Those cracks and imperfections are actually the features of our lives that distinguish us, that particularize us, that keep us from all being the same.

Without the edgy, salty, spicy pieces of our lives, we would not be capable of relationship itself. Thus, we would not be capable of love.

One of the tasks I have taken on, in my teaching and preaching, is the rescue and salvaging of several classical Christian words. I am trying to save some of our Christian vocabulary, words with old meanings that seem irrelevant to many in our world today. The word "salvation" is itself actually one of them. So is "creed." Even "sin," I think, needs to be re-defined.

Today, the one I want to mention is "righteousness." The word "righteous," needs to be rescued. For so many people, it means following and obeying every religious law that was ever devised"probably not a pleasant task, and certainly impossible.

A few years ago, the word was almost rescued, when it was hip to call someone "righteous." "Wow, that's righteous, dude!"

I have come to believe that, usually, when the Bible uses the word "righteousness," in both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible is really talking about "relationship" and "right relationship." People who are described as righteous are in relationship. The verse from Genesis gets repeated often: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

How did belief make Abraham righteous? By simply putting him in relationship with God. It's as simple as that. Faith puts people in relationship, and relationships save us. Relationships save us. Community saves us!

So, I have taken on a new practice. Whenever I read the word "righteous" in scripture, I substitute the word "relationship."

"Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as relationship." Or, from Habakkuk 2:4, "Those in relationship live by faith."

But the substitution really works in today's verse from Matthew. Jesus talks about what it means to fulfill the law and the prophets. "Don't think that I have come to abolish them," he says; they will be fulfilled! But they will be fulfilled by living in relationship with God.

Read Matthew 5:20 this way: "Unless your 'relationship' exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That's because the kingdom of heaven "the community of heaven" is about relationship, right relationship!

The best poets and preachers among us today are those who tell us something about relationship. Good relationships save us. Godly relationships give us life. They give us love.

That's why I like Leonard Cohen dancing me to the end of love. A dance is a relationship, with give and take, grace and movement. Constant adjustment. Being unafraid of cracks and imperfections. Letting another person see your wounds and taste your salt. Belonging to church, that community which is a laboratory for brokenness. Daring to sing a broken Hallelujah.

Your broken life is how the light gets in. Our broken life together, in relationship, is the community of heaven.

AMEN.

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