

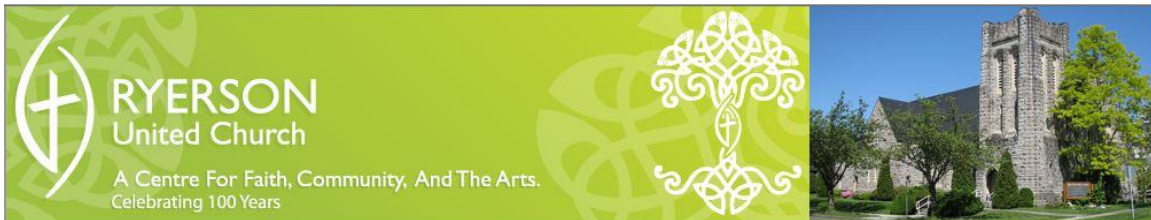
**Juuuust Right – Not:
Matthew 5: 13-20
Debra Bowman, Ryerson United Church
Feb. 6, 2010**

All of you born in the western world will remember the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. For those not from western countries the story goes something like this. There was a little girl named Goldilocks who was wandering in the woods when she came across a house. She did not know this but the house was the home of three bears: a momma bear, a papa bear and a baby bear. When Goldilocks arrived they had all gone out and so, since there was no one home, she walked right in. On the dining room table there were three bowls of porridge. She took a spoonful of the first one but right away she spit it out: "This is too hot!" she whined. When she tried the next bowl she spit that out too: "This is too cold!" And then she tried a spoonful from the third bowl and she declared: "This one is juuuust right!" And she ate the whole thing up. After that she wandered around the house a bit and then decided to sit down. She sat in one chair and then jumped up right away: "This one is too big!" She tried the second chair but once again jumped to her feet: "This one is too big too!" she complained. And then she sat in the third and last chair and declared again: "This one is juuuust right!" After a while though she started to feel sleepy and so she decided to go have a nap. She went upstairs and saw three beds. She laid down in the first one but rolled out quickly: "This one is too hard!" She stepped over to the second bed and lay down again, but not for long: "This one is too soft" she sniffled. She looked at the third bed, and got under the covers. "This one is juuuuust right," she sighed and she nestled down and went to sleep.

And then, after a little while Jesus banged open the door to the house, stomped up the stairs and shouted her awake. "You're not supposed to be looking to be juuuust right," he shouted indignantly. "Just right isn't good enough. You are the salt of the earth; you are a light in the darkness. Just right is just too bland – get up, get out and light things up!"

OK, that's not how the story ends, but if Jesus got to the house before the three bears did I think that's along the lines of what he'd say. Just right is not our vocation. Fitting in, finding a place in the middle, not being too hot or too cold, too soft or too hard, too big or too little is not our vocation. We are, Jesus tells his disciples in every one of the gospels, the salt of the earth. And he wasn't using the image to describe how he hoped we would be – he was using it to declare what and who we are. Just as last week's passage was not about "Blessed are you...if you do these things," but rather and simply: "You are blessed" so this week's passage is not about our potential to be the salt of the earth. No, it's just as direct as last week's reading. "You," the collective, the gathered, all y'all, "You ARE, the salt of the earth. You," all the collected all y'all, "ARE the light of the world."

We, those who bear the good news of Jesus Christ, offer flavor to the world, punch to the pudding, taste to our times. David Ewart in his blog on the scriptures, offers another somewhat unsavoury use of salt in Jesus' time:



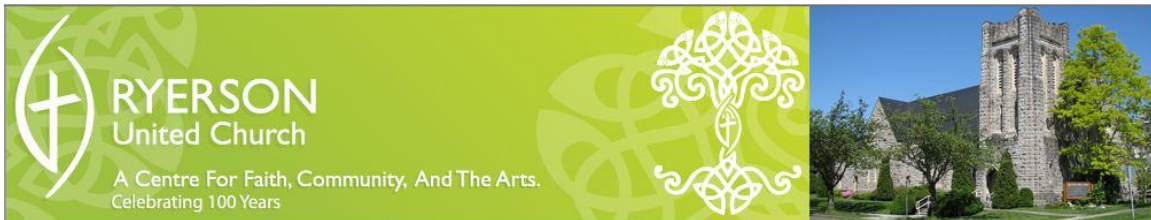
The "earth" [referred to in 'you are the salt of the earth'] is an outdoor earthen oven (see also Job 28:5 and Psalm 12:6) found near the home. ... The earthen oven used dung, [animal feces], as fuel. The dung heap was salted, and salt plates were used as a catalyst to make the dung burn. Salt loses its saltiness when the exhausted plates no longer serve to facilitate burning." (David Ewart, quoting Bruce Malina in Holy Textures) So, put in a more contemporary setting, we are no longer the salt of the earth, we are no longer God's agents in the world when we are no longer stirring up the you-know-what. The role of Christ's followers is to heat up the hearth and get God's creation cooking.

And remember that throughout much of history salt was a very precious commodity. Amongst all those other possible meanings for the image of salt, one more time I find a reason to remind you that God finds us precious. You are the salt of the earth – a precious element of God's creation.

Sometimes we describe a person's language as salty – "Boy those rugby players (and their mom) use some pretty salty language." Salty language, spicy, to the point, jarring. Lloyd Gaston, my New Testament professor, used to tell us that Biblical scholars have taken the salt out of Jesus' language. Where we hear Jesus quoted as saying, "No, verily I say unto you," a more accurate translation was probably, "Hell no!" "Hell no," to injustice, "hell no," to oppression, "hell no," to death and hopelessness. "Hell no!" - the word made salty. (Another story Lloyd used to tell us was in reference to that song, "This Little Light of Mine". He said whenever he heard it he was reminded that early Christians, during Roman oppression, were suspended on poles and lit on fire to illuminate the Roman highways during parades. That may change your response to this song, to say nothing of your commitment to Christian vocation.

When I was researching this passage I came across a sermon by pastor Martin Niemoller. His sermon title is "Christians Must Be a Light in the World." Sounds pretty innocuous until I noticed when and where it was written, Berlin, 1936. The sermon was written after he had been threatened many times by Nazi controlled church authorities; authorities trying to find that 'juuuuust right' place, that heads down, mouths shut, out of trouble place. Several times in his sermon he says with some urgency that he has to speak now, this Sunday, because he doesn't know if he'll be available the next Sunday. If he'll be free, or even alive. Here is some of his salty language:

"The problem with which we have to deal is how to save the Christian community at this moment from the danger of being thrown into the same pot as the world: that is to say: it must keep itself distinct from the rest of the world by virtue of its "saltiness." ... We have come through a time of peril - and we are not finished with it yet - when we were told: 'Everything will be quite different when you as a Church cease to have such an entirely different flavor - when you cease to practice preaching which is the opposite of what the world around you preaches. You really must suit your message to the world; you really must bring your creed into harmony with the present. Then you will again become influential and powerful.' Dear brethren, that means: The salt loses its savor. It is not for us to worry about how the salt is employed, but to see that it does not lose its savor; ... That is our responsibility- 'Ye are the salt of the earth.' It is precisely when we bring the salt into accord and



harmony with the world that we make it impossible for the Lord Jesus Christ, through His Church, to do anything in our nation. But if the salt remains salt, we may trust Him with it: He will use it in such a way that it becomes a blessing." (<http://www.abccog.org/niemoll.htm>)

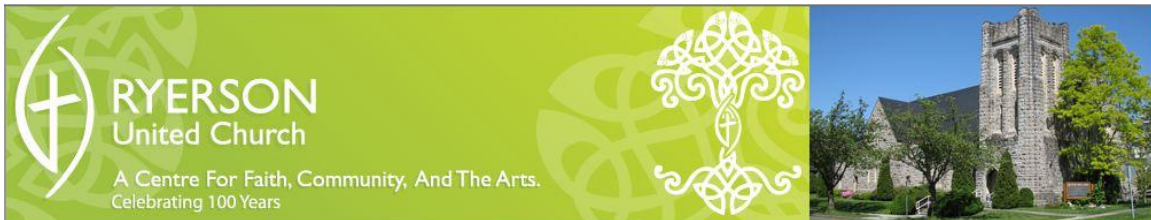
Shortly after this sermon, in which Pastor Niemoller exhorts his congregation to uphold the tangy gospel of love and peace and compassion in the midst of the rising tide of oppression, fear and coercion, (hell no!) he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

Here is more contemporary example of the church offering salt to a stale stew, of offering light in a context of darkness. The Vancouver Interfaith Alliance to End Homelessness is calling on Provincial leadership candidates from the NDP and the Liberal Party to declare a commitment to end homelessness in BC by 2015. It also asks all candidates to press the federal government on a national housing strategy. The letter quotes Rev. Ric Matthews of First United Church: "There are still thousands of homeless people in British Columbia. Ending their plight is a critical issue that needs to be addressed by all three levels of government and the next premier of British Columbia must make this a priority." (News Release, Sandra Severs, First United Church)

You know that many people say that the church and politics should be separate - we see in the words of Pastor Neimoller, in the words of this letter, in the actions of so many salty Christians why indeed our vocation is quite the opposite. We are called, we are created, to offer spice, light, heat, so that, again in the words of Pastor Neimoller, "...The Lord Jesus Christ – who is, as one might say, the cook in charge of this great brew – can utilize the salt for his purposes." In this great earthen oven of creation we are here to stir up the dung.

I have one more example for you. Some of you will remember we celebrated Pat Wakefield's 90th birthday last summer. Since then Pat moved and invited me to come for a visit. As I entered her wonderful new complex and walked towards her great new condo I was looking around for the common eating area. I assumed that if someone was going to move at the age of 90 they would be moving into a seniors' residence. But oh no – Pat packed up and moved from Arbutus area to UBC so she could be closer to 'her kids'. It's her own independent condo, her still self-sufficient space. Once inside I was admiring Pat's kitchen cabinets – they are very attractive. Pat told me that she'd had them installed because the ones that were there when she moved in were too high. She couldn't reach things for cooking and baking. At 90. She got new cupboards. So she can bake and entertain. You know that expression many people use as they age, that we no longer buy green bananas because we're not sure we'll be around long enough for them to ripen. Well, God's salt of the earth and light of the world live fully. For as long and as well as they can. Offering grace and hope and encouragement to those who dwell in darkness and fear. This congregation is full of people like Pat; people who have lived fully and faithfully through many challenges and who, in spite of the many trials of aging, continue to offer seasoning and solace to a wounded world.

You are the light of the world. Not a muted light, set low enough that it doesn't glare, but a light bright enough to illuminate the world. Bright enough to bring light into the dark and broken places of



our world. Bright enough to shine light on injustice, to highlight where God is at work around us. You are the light of the world declares Jesus. Don't put a bucket on your head – let people see all that you are and through you all that I am. Don't put a bucket on the flame in the hopes that you can protect it from the draft, that you can shelter it from strong winds and turmoil. The light must be held in the open for others to see. Vulnerable but visible.

Goldilocks, on top of being a home invader, spit out anything that was outside of her comfort level and settled, indeed insisted on, juuuuust right. Jesus walks another path. He remembers God's words to the church of Laodicea, recorded in the book of Revelation: "So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Rev.3:16)

You are the salt of the earth. You are red hot chili peppers of lived faith. May we never settle for juuuuust right.

Amen

P.S. Sometimes the power of language in the Bible is lost over time. So "You are the light of the world," loses its pointy edges, its jaggedness worn off into a smooth stone over the centuries. Now it's more like damning with faint praise – I imagine someone wearing sensible Oxford shoes and a cardigan and being prudent in all areas of their lives. Maybe we're better to imagine that Christ calls us 'red hot chili peppers' for the world. Colourful and spicy, a bit unpredictable. You are God's red hot chili peppers. I'm going to pass around this bowl of chili peppers. I invite you to take a handful, pass them around telling each other that you are God's red hot chili peppers. And your response might be: "Thanks be to God!"