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2/5/17--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-9a

ELEMENTAL

Some people take a while to bloom. "Late bloomers," we call them. Such a term could apply to a young person who takes a bit longer to develop his or her talents and abilities, or takes a bit longer to mature emotionally as well as physically. But it could also apply to an adult-- maybe someone who needs a bit longer in a new friendship or relationship before they will let down their guard and reveal their true character.

In other cases, however, people may not have the luxury of waiting to let their inner qualities bloom. Life circumstances may force a person to draw upon their inner qualities and gifts sooner than expected. My mother was only 14 years old when her mother died, and she was forced to quickly grow up and learn how to care for the house, fix the meals, and care for her younger sister.

In our reading from Matthew today, Jesus has gathered his disciples around him and he tells them that now is the time for them to reveal their inner qualities--specifically, to reveal the qualities and characteristics of their faith. In telling them this, Jesus uses two metaphors to describe his disciples. He first tells them, "You are the salt of the earth." And then he tells them, "You are the light of the world." Jesus tells his followers that they are salt and light. Like salt, he needs them to flavor the world with their distinctiveness. Like light, he needs them to shine the light of God into the world.

Jesus tells them this because he understands the human tendency to let the distinctive flavor of God diminish within us, or to hide the light of God that exists within us. This diminishment of our distinct flavor happens when we grow complacent with our life or our

world, or when we become apathetic or indifferent to human suffering, or when we are overly scheduled and too busy to become involved, or when we are caught up with the values of this world. Our saltiness gets diminished.

This tendency to hide our light happens when we are afraid, or when we are insecure about our abilities, or when don't think we have much to offer anyone. Jesus tells his disciples who they are--salt and light--and then he warns them not to let their distinctiveness fade, not to hide the brightness of their light. In other words, it is time to bloom. Now is the time, now is the moment, now is the need for them to draw upon all their qualities and characteristics and to let the values of their faith be revealed in our world.

What I noticed in this lesson is that Jesus is not telling them to *become* salt or to *become* light. Instead, Jesus tells them that they already *are* salt and light. These qualities already exist within them.

I know I can't be the only one who feels like this modern world we live in is terribly complex. There are so many things we have to master, so many things that seem complicated and beyond our grasp. My computer printer died on me this week. I don't know how to fix it. Is it a simple matter or is the whole thing shot? I lack the necessary knowledge to make that judgment. The issues confronting our world are complex and nuanced. What policies work best, what approaches should we take in dealing with the economic and social issues of our world? There are so many perspectives and even the experts do not agree. There is much in our world that is complicated and hard to master. We lack the necessary knowledge and coming by that knowledge is not easy.

But notice what Jesus does. He takes the simplest elements--the basic elements of life, like salt and light--to help us see and understand what we can do and what we can be in this

world. It's not complex. He used salt and light to tell us something important about ourselves. In a moment we will celebrate communion and recall how Jesus used the simple elements of bread and wine to tell us something important about *himself*--about his role in nourishing us, about his willingness to share himself.

Jesus used the basic elements of life to help us grasp something elemental about who we are and what our mission is in life. What he is telling us today with the salt and light metaphors is that you and I already possess within us the qualities necessary to live out our faith. This is not something so complicated we can't master it. Generosity already exists within you. Compassion already exists within you. Forgiveness already exists within you. Outrage at some kind of wrongdoing is already there. Sometimes we have to take the time to find these elements, to nourish them, to release them. But they are already there. You have the capacity to flavor this world with generosity, justice, compassion, grace, love. You have the power to do that. You have the power to do that every single day because the basic elements are already within you.

The basic elements of our faith are not complicated to understand. The prophet Isaiah reminds us today of these basic elements. His people were all caught up in honoring God with displays of piety and by holding special fasts. But Isaiah tells them that faithfulness is not about performing rituals. Instead, Isaiah tells us what God values and what God expects of us with these words which seem especially meaningful in these current times we are facing. God declares, "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Being a faithful follower of God comes down to these basic elements: justice, compassion, kindness, service, generosity, sharing. These are the elemental ingredients for a life of faithfulness to God.

Jesus tells his followers, that's you and me, to reveal these basic elemental ingredients. We are salt. We are light. We are called to flavor the world with God, to shine the light of God by living out these basic components.

The current times we face beckon us to rise to the moment and become the salt and light of God. Now is not the time to be a late bloomer with living out our faith. Your salt is needed. Your light is needed. These qualities are sorely needed in our world today. And you already have everything you need to follow Jesus. We together already have everything we need to follow Jesus.

And so, we will honor and protect the vulnerable--the poor, the foreign born, the disabled--because that is what Jesus did.

We will welcome the immigrant, the refugee, the stranger--because that is what Jesus did.

We will speak up for people of all races, religions, genders, nationalities--because that is what Jesus did.

We will listen to those with whom we disagree, looking for the best in them, open to what we may learn from them--because that is what Jesus did.

And as hard as it sometimes is, we will hope, even in the face of great obstacles and dark times, we will hope in the power of God to be at work in our world and in and through us--because that is what Jesus did.

It's elemental, you see--like salt and light, bread and wine. You are the salt of the earth. God's salt. You are the light of the world. God's light. And together we become God's city set on a hill, shining out the love of God for all.