Salt of the Earth

Matthew 5:13-15
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My 11th grade United States history teacher, Coach Lloyd Mitchell, brought Jesus’ words to bear in his classroom one day. One or two or three of us were displaying low-grade comic behavior which was attention-getting and not “learning atmosphere appropriate.” Coach Mitchell, in his dry and sometimes understated wit, stood tall, and said in a low but clear voice, “It’s often not as important to be the life of the party, as it is important to be the salt of the earth. Let’s get on to seriously considering some people who have been the salt of the earth.”

Jesus’ wisdom shared with those early disciples was not precisely to be “careful” or to avoid being “careless,” or even to stop trying to be “the life of the party.” Jesus’ wisdom shared with disciples is to be “the salt of the earth.” This would also be distinct from simply being “a salty character.” Not always, but often, a “salty character” (or someone with a “salty personality”) is crusty, acerbic, prickly, dwelling on the negative, putting down others in order to feel self-justified. Some “salty characters” may be among those who are “the salt of the earth,” but whether “salty” or not in character, let’s explore what it most likely means to be “the salt of the earth.”

Salt – sodium chloride (chemically abbreviated, NaCl) – if added to food in too great a quantity, can ruin the taste of food. Sodium in too great a quantity in a person’s body can damage the kidneys and create high blood pressure. A correct level of sodium facilitates the transmission of nutrients through the body’s cells and facilitates correct nervous system functioning. Sodium in too low a quantity can lead to muscle cramping and even seizures. Yet, in Jesus’ metaphor, sodium chloride / NaCl / salt is a preservative and flavor additive in relation to food. If salt has lost its “salt capacity,” it cannot flavor or preserve. How do we know – of ourselves or others – if we are “the right amount of salt” to serve as God intends in God’s world? Repeating that question: How do we know – of ourselves or others – if we are “the right amount of salt” to serve as God intends in God’s world?

I am helped by L. Frank Baum’s characters in “The Wizard of Oz.” The Scarecrow desires a brain to think. The Tin Man desires a heart to feel connecting emotions like love and compassion. The Cowardly Lion desires courage. To be “the right amount of salt” to serve as God intends in God’s world calls for thinking high and deep and wide, calls for connective feelings, and calls for courage.

In Roald Dahl’s 1988 novel for teen readers, “Matilda,” also adapted and produced as a movie and a stage musical, Matilda is a 5 year old English primary school student. While her family is engaged in business and recreational enterprises which do not interest young Matilda in the least, she reads selected works of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Kipling, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Orwell. She is not arrogant, but Matilda is also unintimidated by her family’s indifference toward her passion for learning, as they make concerted efforts to resist her brilliance. The primary school principal – or headmistress – is Ms. Trunchbull. She is physically imposing, and spares no opportunity to intimidate her faculty and students. One day Ms. Trunchbull is building up herself by putting down the students when she says: “If you all desire to know how a real school is run, read Charles Dickens’ story, ‘Nicholas Nickleby’” … at which point a voice from the back of the room says, “I have read it.” Ms. Trunchbull replies, “You are lying to me! I doubt there is a single child in this entire school who has read that book. Do you take me for a fool, child?” (pgs. 18 & 156). Matilda’s mental focus – exercising her
brain’s constructive thought-capacity – sends Ms. Trunchbull over the edge. Ms. Trunchbull has a salty personality – too salty. Matilda, the five year old, exemplifies the salt of the earth.

In the months before his death in February 1993, forty-nine year old Arthur Ashe worked with writer Arnold Rampersad to draft his memoir, entitled “Days of Grace.” L. Frank Baum’s Tin Man desired a heart to feel connecting emotions like love and compassion. Hear Arthur Ashe’s words to those who later would read about his connecting emotions in life: “People sometimes inquire if I ever ask, ‘Why me?’ If I ask ‘Why me?’ as I am assaulted by heart disease and AIDS, I must ask, ‘Why me?’ about my blessings and question my right to enjoy them. The morning after I won Wimbledon in 1975, I should have asked ‘Why me?’ and doubted that I deserved the victory. I also do not spend time pleading with God to make me well. When I played tennis, I never prayed for victory in a match. I will not pray now to be cured of heart disease or AIDS … I am a fortunate and blessed man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems” (pgs.326 and 328). “Camera, my daughter, spiritual nourishment is as important as physical nourishment or intellectual nourishment. The religion you choose is not nearly as important as a fundamental faith in God. I have worshiped among Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptist, and Catholics across the years. Have a sense of yourself as created by God for a purpose. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Do not beg God for favors. Instead, ask God for the wisdom to do what is right and for the will to do it. Read the psalms and the Sermon on the Mount. You will find consolation in your darkest hours, and you will grow into a deeper understanding of life’s meanings” (pgs. 340-341). Arthur Ashe’s faith and spirituality gave evidence of connecting emotions like love and compassion. For his daughter and for others, he exemplified being the salt of the earth.

To be “the right amount of salt” to serve in God’s world as God intends calls for thinking high and deep and wide; it calls for holy connective feelings; it calls for courage. Arguably, one of the finest expressions of courage amid life’s struggles, during life’s sufferings, and discerning about serving from God’s calling is represented in the “Finale,” from Schonberg and Boublil’s 1980 adaptation of Victor Hugo’s novel, “Les Miserables,” set in the time of the French Revolution: “And remember the truth that once was spoken: To love another person is to see the face of God! Do you hear the people sing? Lost in the valley of the night, it is the music of a people who are climbing to the light. For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest nights will end and the sun will rise. They will live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord. They will walk behind the ploughshare. They will put away the sword. The chain will be broken, and all will have their reward! Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me? Somewhere beyond the barricade is there a world you long to see? Do you hear the people sing? Say, do you hear the distant drums? It is the future that they bring when tomorrow comes!” Such a communion of those who courageously share love is a communion which, in love, sees the face of God and exemplifies, as Jesus teaches, being the salt of the earth.

With an inquiring mind like Matilda’s, with a heart testifying to the connecting emotions of love and compassion like Arthur Ashe, and with courage for the personal and political challenges facing each one as in the “Finale” of “Les Miserables,” God’s people (even you and I) can be “the right amount of salt” as Jesus teaches. And from even “the likes” of us, God can continue an imperfect – yet strong enough – witness throughout the world. We pray God to continue claiming and involving us as the right amount of salt. – All honor and praise be to God.