

Salt and Light

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One of the email newsletters I subscribe to is by a farmer named Adam Wilson. Adam has a farm called Sand River Community in upstate New York which is unusual because the farm doesn't sell or buy any food. Instead the farm operates on what Adam calls "radical neighboring" which means he gives food and labor and help freely to his neighbors with no obligation for them to share in return. But they do; not always, but often, neighbors share with him what he needs to live.

Lately, Adam has been writing about what he calls the "normalization of non-sharing." One example he gives of this that has stuck with me is: if a parent has enough food but withholds it from their child so they are hungry, they are called neglectful. They can have their child removed from their home and they may even be imprisoned for their cruelty. But this understanding only applies within the immediate family or household. When I have plenty of food and I don't share it with those outside of my home who are hungry, there are no legal repercussions or any community judgement about it.

It isn't that there is a law passed that says, "You don't have to care about people beyond your front door." But, we have learned to walk past need. We've learned to say, "That's sad," and keep moving. We've learned to think of generosity as optional, heroic, or extraordinary, instead of ordinary and expected. And over time, non-sharing doesn't feel cruel anymore — it just feels normal.

But, not always, and not everywhere, because this made me think of this meme that's made me laugh every time I've seen it recently. It says, "the way people are clutching their pearls and accusing protestors of being 'too organized' and that it's proof they must be funded by some nefarious organization. It's like they've never encountered a Lutheran potluck. I've seen Lutheran church women put together a funeral luncheon for 200 people in half an hour. Every one of them owns a giant coffee urn and 50 9x13 pans. You want funeral potatoes or hotdish in quantity? Call them." I think this goes for Presbyterians too.

Because while our society has normalized non-sharing, plenty of us still feel called to share; plenty of us still feel called to help, to be a radical neighbor. But it doesn't just happen.

One pastor who posted this meme said along with it "I sometimes hear about people visiting their local churches and liking them but then complaining that there are 'too many older church ladies' so they want to go to a church where people are 'younger'".

She goes on, “To them I say this: you should hope to grow up to be an old church lady. You should want to be the kind of person who can teach the children of immigrants how to read, fill up the community fridge with casseroles, hold candles at freezing vigils, and show up at the local meetings where decisions are being made.

The misogyny and ageism is bad enough, but it worries me because too many younger Christians are losing the lessons that intergenerational churches teach. They are forgetting that church can be a place to learn how to be a community, take care of everyone, and get stuff done for your neighbors and world.

So if you walk into a church and see a bunch of gray heads, go ahead in. Raise your kids there. Show them what good can look like. And then, bring your friends. When you are retired and gray, you’re going to want a place like this, and a gang of folks who are ready to do good work together full time”

And that sounded right to me because over and over again, I’ve seen it here at Covenant. When I ask, “Will you take food to someone who had surgery? Will you drive someone to a medical appointment? Will you give money for a mission project? Will you knit hats for the hat drive? Will you hold that baby that isn’t yours for a minute? Will you teach kids who aren’t yours? Will you weed the garden or tend the compost? And implied in each of those questions: Will you do these things with no regard for payment or concern for what you’ll get back?” The answer is almost always yes.

But, this doesn’t happen just because we are nice. In a culture that does so much to normalize non-sharing, this kind of generous giving happens because we’ve practiced saying yes to one another for a long time. It happens because we trust each other. Because we know that when we give, we won’t be giving alone. It comes from years of showing up, failing sometimes, learning what works, and doing it again anyway. And as I read Jesus’ words about being salt and light, I knew part of what he is talking about is exactly this - the casseroles, the rides, the showing up.

Salt and light seem really simple, but there is a lot Jesus is saying with those simple examples.

First, Jesus is telling people who’ve never heard it before that they have something to share. The people gathered on the mount here were mostly people who were poor or foreigners or sick in some way. These were people who were mostly looked down upon in all kinds of ways. They were lazy. They were dumb. They were moochers. They were unlucky. They were criminals. And Jesus says THEY are salt for and light to the world. What does that mean? That means Jesus was telling them something they had never heard before. They were valuable. They had worth and meaning. They had something to offer, something to share. Imagine hearing that for the first time. Imagine being poor,

sick, foreign, or unwanted — and being told not that you should try harder, not that you should clean yourself up — but that *you already matter*. That you already belong. That the world would be poorer without what you have to share. Jesus doesn't say, "You could become salt and light someday." He says, "You are."

And not just those people gathered on the mount 2000 years ago, but people now. That today, we need to remember that it is not just the rich or the educated or the popular or the beautiful who have something to share or that deserve to be shared with. Jesus uses the plural "you" here - the only equivalent in English is "y'all or youse guys" But he means everyone. That means when we look at others to determine if they are people we want to share our salt and light with, the answer should always be yes. And if we have ever been made to think we don't have anything to share—or that we aren't worthy of being shared with—that's wrong too.

Second, Jesus chooses salt and light as the examples, not turmeric and gold. Salt and light are not rare, but items with a wide variety of everyday purposes. Salt can flavor or preserve or heal. There are so many kinds of light – sun and the stars and the moon, candles and fire, today electric. We are not all the same. We don't all need to do the same thing. Each of us has particular gifts to be offered and they will make a difference in the world when we share them. Our lives matter. We have a purpose and a calling. Our life's work is discerning those gifts and putting them to use.

Third, salt is not salt for itself. Salt exists to preserve or flavor or heal what is not itself. Light is not light for itself. Light illumines what is around it. In other words, when we know our gifts, we are meant to put them to good use for more than just ourselves. We are meant to use our gifts for the world. Which can sound really big, but what is the world besides our neighbors and community and the land where we live? Who we are and what we do should preserve life beyond our own and light more than our own path. Jesus invites us to ask ourselves regularly: what am I doing to make the kind of difference that salt makes to food or light makes to darkness? How am I, you, we showing up for the world? Which may be the same as asking how we are sharing what we have with our neighbors – the people who make up the world closest to us.

There is no shortage of possibilities of how you can do this. This past week I went to two different online trainings about what is happening with ICE in Minnesota and what if a similar thing happens here. There were all kinds of experts talking about what churches and individuals can and can't do legally. But, every speaker reminded us that there is something for everyone to do. It doesn't matter how old you are, if you have limitations, if you are tired, if you don't feel comfortable taking a public stand, if you have small children at home, if you can't give money right now – no matter what you imagine to be your barrier, there are always ways to be salt and light.

And I want to be clear — being salt and light does not mean being everything to everyone. Salt is used in small amounts. Light doesn't shout; it shines. Some seasons you bring casseroles. Some seasons you receive them. Some seasons your gift is energy and time. Other seasons your gift is wisdom, prayer, or simply being present. But what being salt and light isn't is abstract—it's practical, communal, and shared.

We aren't called to be heroes, we are called to have habits. Habits that turn away from the normalization of non-sharing and instead give freely and generously on a regular basis. Habits which lift up our gifts as the salt and light of our days. Habits which give life daily flavor. Habits illuminate where there is need.

Because habits are how faith is passed on — not just through beliefs, but through habits. Through watching adults show up. Through learning that when someone is hurting, you don't ask first whether it's your responsibility. You ask how you can help. That when you see someone without something you have enough of, you share.

We don't need one hero to help us in these times. We need thousands, millions of people who want to normalize sharing and get into radical neighbor-ing. We need people who will use their gifts to lift others up, preserve life and shine a light wherever they see darkness. We need people who aspire to be an older church lady (if you aren't already). So, may we be people who make sharing normal again. May we be salt that gives life flavor and light that helps others find their way. Amen.