

Mining for Good Salt
February 6, In the Year of Our LORD, 2011
First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-16

Not surprisingly, my mother took great interest in knowing which parts of Germany and Austria Sally and I visited during our trip last month. My parents spent eighteen years in Europe and for most of that time their children were along for the wonderful experience. Sally and I flew into Munich as much because it was the city which involved the least expensive round trip fare I could find on expedia.com, but with no regrets as I had lived in that city for five years as a child.

In the few days we were in Munich, Sally and I walked to Nymphenburg, a Palace in the middle of the city, ice skated on the canal that graces its long front approach, were in the city's central square for the 11am playing of the Glockenspiel, had lunch in the Hofbrauhaus, strolled through a toy museum, shopped, took subways and streetcars out to the suburb Harlaching so that Sally could take a photo of me in front of the house at 86 Geiselassteigstrasse where our family lived for most of those years, ... we ate good food, ... we enjoyed ourselves immensely. In Austria, we were able to cross country ski one day, hike a second, enjoy a glorious day of downhill skiing atop a mountain with a 365 degree view of the Austrian mountains on the third day – and then it started to rain.

Rain clearly limited our planned activities. Well, only somewhat, ... as one can still enjoy good food when it rains and rain doesn't stop one from shopping. Although there were no museums near Grundlsee and Bad Aussee where stayed for our week of "skiing," – the museums part of the trip came days later in Salzburg – there was one site very much worth visiting – one of the major salt mines in Austria. Salt mines. The two word combination causes an immediate and visceral reaction in my mind – and spine. I remembered the last time I was in a salt mine in Germany as a child – and the experience is one of those I would just as soon forget. And I knew ... *knew* ... that if I spoke of visiting a salt mine to my mother, she would not only remember my experience ... it would be the very first thing she would mention. She did not disappoint. During one of my conversations with my mother after our return from Europe, I paused, took in my breath, mentioned that we had visited a salt mine and heard what I expected. Without pause: "Did you go down the slide this time? Or did Sally make you do it this time? I am glad she makes you do things I couldn't get you to do." ... Thanks mom!

Even though there are perfectly good sets of stairs to get one from one level of a salt mine to another, Germans and Austrians construct narrow, somewhat steep slides to allow quick access down to lower parts of the mountain. At the age of ten, I already had earned my mother's irritation because I would refuse to go on carnival rides – particularly roller coasters (to Sally's chagrin, I still won't go on roller coasters) – clearly remember her frustration on one occasion when I wouldn't even hang by my knees from a monkey bar and then, in a mine in Germany, I refused to go down a slide that everyone else seemed to enjoy.

“Did you go down the slide this time? Or did Sally make you do it this time? I am glad she makes you do things I couldn’t get you to do.”

“Yes mom, I went down the slide this time.” I let that sink in for a moment. Then, I added the confession: “Sally made me.”

I survived. I did so well that when we reached the second slide, Sally and I were the first two to make our way down to the next level. A record of that second ride is available in a photo.

I mention that salt mine today – and the gumption I garnered to go down the slides – on this particular Sunday for a couple of reasons. First, that we are to be like the “salt of the earth” is part of today’s Gospel Lesson. Clearly, the experience of the tour of that salt mine is also fresh in my mind. As intriguing as it was to walk four tenths of a mile through a dimly lit tunnel into the bowels of a mountain, as incredible is the process by which the salt is mined using modern techniques, as much fun as the slides were, the incredible part of the visit to that mine was to hear of how the mine was used during the Second World War – when the Nazi regime, having raped European art museums, used that mine – perfect for storage because of temperature and humidity – to store thousands of pieces of art, including the works of Michelangelo, Dürer, Rubens and Vermeer. As horrific was the act of theft perpetrated by the cronies of Herr Hitler, an event worse act was planned as the Second World War neared its conclusion and its outcome was obvious even to the staunchest Nazi. A senior officer decided that if the Germans were going to lose the war and thereby any claim – illegitimate as it was – to the art, then no one should have it. He set about ordering that bombs be placed in such a way as to implode the mountain. To the guide’s credit, he admitted that perhaps the miners removed the bombs to preserve their jobs as an imploded mountain meant an end to mining, but the result was the same. The miners of 1945 took the risk – getting caught would have meant their execution – to remove the bombs and thereby save their vocations – and all of that incredible art.

I do this rarely, but occasionally, definitions from dictionaries are appropriate:

- salt·y Adjective /'sôltē/

Synonyms:

- adjective: [saline](#), [briny](#), [salted](#), [brackish](#)
- saltier comparative; saltiest superlative
- Tasting of, containing, or preserved with salt
- (of language or humor) Down-to-earth; coarse
- Tough; aggressive

As you recall, these are some of the words I composed for this morning’s Call to Worship: “We gather and hear how God wants us to be like fresh salt and bright lights! Like fresh salt and bright lights? What does that mean? Like salt that adds zest to the taste of food, we are to be like salt, ensuring that we share the Good News of Christ with zest, vim and vigor!”

Mindful of how my mother has found opportunities to fuss at me over the decades – I think she considers that part of her “job description” even now at the age of 89 – I changed a word in this sermon after one of those visceral reactions I get to “memories.” In stating this sermon’s

thesis, I was going to use the word “guts” – but my mother claims that is an ugly word, so although I just said it (take that, Mom!), I will change it to gumption. Here goes – I have practiced the pace and emphasis - it is one long sentence – 210 words to be exact (I had to know):

Given the gumption of people in the past whose lives all of us – younger and older disciples alike – have studied recently – Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ghandi, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton ... persons who took incredible risks, were definitely like salt in the wounds of their nation’s faults and shortcomings – with that history part of our congregation’s worship and teaching over the course of the last few months – added to the tale of salt miners in Altausee, Austria, the “zest, vim and vigor” – to say nothing of the sheer bravery - of people in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria to stand up to repressive dictatorships – added to the struggle in which some people are willing to be engaged to insist on economic and social justice here in this land – justice for all peoples of every ilk, background and “standing,” ... do we, any of us, and if so, to what degree, hear the words of Jesus of Nazareth and have the gumption to do more than just stand or sit here and listen to good words about good people but not really – *really* – take any risks to challenge to any degree the status quos with which so many of us are comfortable.

Certainly you recognize that the primary audience to whom a preacher is often orating is her or himself. Some of what I just shared with you stings me personally. Rarely have I faced tough challenges in life. I have certainly never wanted for anything. I served in the military for 28 years and did not see a single day of combat or danger to life and limb. I have served four congregations without much fuss and bother. My family has, for the most part, enjoyed good health. With the exception of that congregation in New London, Connecticut that didn’t hire me because I wasn’t tall enough, I have not experienced bitterness born of discrimination, but then as a healthy white Anglo-Saxon educated male, my “type” tends to enjoy privileges others do not. I wonder at times if I am handicapped by not having a handicap.

So it is that I need to be careful, like so many of my ilk, lest in our circumstances, we sit back, accept our more privileged lot in life, occasionally raise our voices about injustice but, as suggested by the homily on the back of this morning’s worship bulletin in fact do little about it; recognize and perhaps object to the reality that so many people in the world live without the religious, political, economic or social freedoms so many of us in this country enjoy, but, again, do little more than give the lip service that can be oh so eloquent, but actually accomplish so very little. And ... acknowledging that and actually leaving my safety zone and doing something different are two very different phenomena as I, like many of us, am not about to leave the security of “hearth and home” and fly off to some far off land – except for short mission trips from which I can always safely return – and do something hard and challenging for a period of time.

So, what does it mean to be like salt that has not lost its taste, or to be the light of the world that shines for all to see ... in the context of how we understand the grace of God as expressed through Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Holy Spirit, the One Church? Certainly there are those, who in the name of that same God, are full of vim and vigor as they insist that their

understanding of Christianity is about very specific codes of personal behavior or by those who emphasize that faith is all about who is going to be in heaven and who is going to be in hell or those who make sure that stewardship is about an exact amount of what one is to contribute – all of which, by the way, are legitimate issues, but which we claim to be only part of the whole challenge God renders humankind. We know, as found in our reading from Isaiah for today, of how some people back then, mirrored in the behavior of so many today, so narrowly defined the parameters of what characterizes true faithfulness that they have miss much of what God really considers important and wants of those who would be faithful.

In the passage Dinah read, the people of Israel claimed God should have noticed how they fasted as expected and that they put on sackcloth and ashes to demonstrate their humility. God, suspecting that the fasting was balanced by feasting before and after and that the use of sackcloth and ashes were for show and donned in a spirit that was anything but humble, God suggested [Isaiah 58:6-8]:

Is not ***this*** the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ***Then*** your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; ***then*** your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

While I, we, can always do more – and need to find ways for that to be true, I find some satisfaction in these words from Isaiah that seem to be echoed in Jesus’ words as found in the last verses of Matthew 25 (“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and gave me drink, I was naked and sick and imprisoned and you”), for I think it shows that I, you, we are on the right path. Our intentions to confront injustice and prejudice as witnesses to God’s love for all people, certainly our participation in feeding the hungry and clothing those in need – all of that characterizes part of the mission and ministry in which we take an active part. But there is no resting on laurels, and there are more risks to take. Together, with encouragement and sometimes a slight nudge or push from our sisters and brothers in faith, each of us can find ways to be all the more active, all the more faithful, all the more willing to take stock of our contributions to the tasks of ministry we claim to accomplish in the name of our God. From words to actions to change – with the grace of God, that evolution will occur and we will find we have mined good and faithful salt for the journey, have made sure the light of God’s grace shines on everyone, and found ways to be full of the zest, vim and vigor God expects of us – and that we expect of each other.

With all of that said, let me be clear: I will look in a mirror on many an occasion and ask myself what more I can do for God’s people – not just say I will do but *actually* do. In that same vein of thought, I will not hesitate next time to go down a slide in a salt mine. However, I will still never hang by my knees from a monkey bar and I will never go on a roller coaster.

Amen.