

Salty and Shining  
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This week, I finished reading Paul Revere's Ride by David Hackett Fisher. Now, I'm an expert on the start of the Revolutionary War, just so you know. Fischer ended his fantastic historical work with more great stories, particularly about the role regular folks played in these significant events. It's like Tolkien once wrote in *The Hobbit*, "It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay." I found some parallels with letting our lights shine and being salty, ordinary folks from Matthew's Gospel and Fisher's stories of ordinary New Englanders keeping the darkness at bay in 1775.

Our first story deals with Lord Percy, the very popular British commander who marched to Lexington after the skirmishes were underway on April 19th, saving the day for the British Regulars who had been routed after the Old North Bridge and Parker's Revenge and the whole deal. Lord Percy left Boston in a hurry and had no idea what he was really getting into, so much so that his brigade didn't supply themselves very well. General Gage himself sent two ammunition wagons with an escort of one officer and thirteen men to supply Lord Percy and his brigade during the battle.

Now there were elderly New England men who were exempt from service in the militia due to their age, but they were part of the alarm system set up throughout the region and they helped monitor troop movements. A party of these elderly men intercepted the ammunition wagons and demanded the troops' surrender. We can imagine that the Regulars were not very impressed by these old guys threatening them, especially since the Regulars categorized most New Englanders as "peasants," "country people," "rebels," or "the despicable rabble" among other colorful terms. The Regulars kept moving forward at which point these old rebels opened fire, shooting the lead horses, killing two sergeants, and wounding the officer in command. The surviving soldiers took another look at these old peasants and ran for their lives, throwing their weapons into a pond along the way. The soldiers found an old woman named Mother Batherick and immediately surrendered to her and begged for her protection. Mother Batherick took them to the home of Militia Captain Ephraim Frost, saying, "If you ever live to get back, you tell King George that an old woman took six of his grenadiers prisoner." [1]

Another story was about a salt of the earth soldier named Samuel Whittemore who was 78-years-old and badly crippled. As the Regulars fought their way back to Charlestown, he stationed himself along the road in what is Arlington today. He was armed with a musket, two pistols, and his old cavalry saber behind a stone wall. Patiently waiting for the right opportunity, Whittemore fired five shots with such speed and accuracy that a British detachment was sent to stop him. When they tried, he shot three more soldiers and was going for his saber when they finally brought him down. He miraculously survived fourteen wounds and ended up living to be 96-years-old. Fischer says that Samuel Whittemore "populated a large part of Middlesex County with a progeny of Whittemores who are today as tough and independent as the sturdy old rebel who stood alone against a British brigade." [2]

Now I don't share these tales to glorify war; I'm not trying to revel in the violence or the battles. But what Fisher emphasizes is that there were so many people playing so many parts, some of them quite small but somehow meaningful, in these monumental days in the history of our country. From a little old woman who had six soldiers surrender to her, to those elderly men who prevented troops getting more weapons and supplies to hurt or kill more of their neighbors, to one lone man stationing himself behind a stone wall on the road to help the cause of liberty the only way he knew how. These were normal, ordinary, regular people not

even in local militias, doing what they could to help the cause in the midst of chaos and destruction.

You see, Jesus tries to inspire normal, ordinary, regular people today by saying, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"[3] This metaphor deals with discipleship again and the parts we have to play as children of God and brothers and sisters one to another. Telling the disciples that they are the salt of the earth suggests that they all have the capacity to bring the goodness and flavor out of the world. For those cooks among us, you've likely heard the cooking instruction to "salt to taste" before. Salt as a seasoning can reduce bitterness and brings out the flavor of other, more subtle ingredients. When used correctly, salt may be the only ingredient you need to add to a dish, and all of a sudden it tastes great![4]

In the ancient world, salt preserved food and made it last longer. Even our modern word "salary" comes from the word "salt." Salt was highly valued, often worth its weight in gold. Moreover, some workers, including Roman soldiers, may have been partly paid for their labor in salt. Others relate that soldiers were given a special sum of money to then go buy salt. Either way, salt was vital to ancient peoples and Jesus tells us that we are to be the salt of the earth and we have to keep our saltiness intact. That meant more to his disciples back then, but we can bring out the good flavors in others today. We can reduce bitterness and help balance the world.[5]

Jesus also tell us, "You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."[6] Marcia Riggs, an Ethics Professor from Columbia Seminary, reflects on Jesus' words by saying that, "Light enables us to see things and is a kind of energy that gives things color, helps vegetation to grow, provides solar power for electricity, and can be focused for specific uses, such as a laser. Like light, the disciples as a gathered community have the overarching purpose of being the mirror that refracts God's light so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy."[7] When we work together in a gathered community, we can help to engage the world much better than we can on our own. But we are to be salt and light, working individually and collectively to spread God's love.

These verses from Matthew are also a bit of an admonishment or at least a gentle prodding to put ourselves out there a bit. You know, what's the point of salt that doesn't taste salty anymore? What's the point of hiding a light underneath a basket so you can't even see its rays? It's a message of challenge found in one of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes comics. Calvin is at school and he asks the girl sitting next to him, "What grade did you get?" She relates proudly that she got an A. Calvin says, "Really? Boy I'd hate to be you. I got a C." She asks him why on earth he would rather get a C than an A, it makes no sense. And Calvin calmly replies, "I find my life is a lot easier the lower I keep everyone's expectations." [8] Don't we sometimes prefer when people have lower expectations of us? Then maybe we don't have to worry about disappointing anyone. Don't we sometimes have low expectations for ourselves? Life may be easier that way as Calvin says, but is it truly fulfilling? Is this what God wants of us?

For me, that's the point of our scripture today and Fischer's stories for that matter. If you noticed, his tales highlighted the actions of older people—an old group of men keeping watch on the roads, an old woman who accepted the soldiers' surrender, and a lone old man standing up to a whole cohort of soldiers. They could have easily had low expectations of themselves given that they weren't even part of the militia and these events were spiraling out of control all around them and they were enjoying retirement so to speak. But they were salt and light, not losing their saltiness, not hiding their light but shining for all to see. They wanted their actions

to count for something, even if they might not have been as mighty and strong as they once were.

Jesus really brings his message home by saying that he didn't come to abolish the law or the prophets who came before him. Rather, he came not to abolish but to fulfill.<sup>[9]</sup> We have to be careful here with toxic Christian ideas of supersessionism that has been part of our history, implying that Judaism doesn't matter anymore because along came Jesus and Christianity to set things right. What Jesus is doing here is claiming his rightful place in God's history of liberation and the covenant God made with God's people. He's not saying that none of the teachings of the prophets and the law matter anymore, he's saying that he wants to extend the mission and change the mission and challenge the system, but he's not scraping the whole thing.

Jesus is telling us today to be salt and light—salty for all to experience and shining for all to see. We can bring out some good flavors in the world and counter bitterness and despair, we do have that power. We can bring light to a dark and broken world, drawing people to the warmth and radiance of God among us.

But we cannot bring the light of Christ to others if we don't even know how and where that light needs to shine inside our own hearts, inside our very selves; to drive out the darkness that can seem all-consuming. This inner exploration can help us drive the darkness out of the world too. Being salt and light isn't about our own personal enjoyment though; it's about working individually and together to fulfill the law as Jesus commands—to love God with our entire beings and our neighbors and ourselves. Remember and take heart, for "It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay." Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] David Hackett Fisher, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 244.

[2] *Ibid*, 257.

[3] Matthew 5:13, NRSV.

[4] Joshua Rivera, "What 'Salt to Taste' Actually Means" on *Lifehacker*, January 23, 2013, <http://lifehacker.com/5978417/what-salt-to-taste-actually-means>.

[5] Marcia Y. Riggs, "Theological Perspective" on Matthew 5:13-20 in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, 332.

[6] Matthew 5:14 and 16, NRSV.

[7] Marcia Y. Riggs, "Theological Perspective" on Matthew 5:13-20 in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, 332-334.

[8] Bill Watterson, *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury*, 15.

[9] Matthew 5: 17, NRSV.