

Please Pass the Salt (Matt. 5.13-20)
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February 6, 2011

Although it has been over fifty years since it happened, Franklin McCain remembers it like it was yesterday. In interviews, his voice still sounds young as he tells the story, a gentle North Carolinian drawl rising and falling with the events he describes.¹ Franklin couldn't have ever guessed that the action he took with three of his friends would resonate so deeply. He couldn't have known that the movement would spread so quickly; to 21 cities that first week, 112 cities the next. He couldn't have imagined that he and his friends would go into the history books called by the name of the "Greensboro Four." All Franklin knew was that there was something he had to do that day.

On February 1, 1960, Franklin walked into the F. W. Woolworth store in downtown Greensboro. His friends trailing behind, they each took a seat at the lunch counter and quietly waited to be served. Patrons turned and stared at the young men because they were black, and, therefore, not allowed the same service as white people. It's difficult for us to imagine or remember now, but at that time the country was racially segregated in nearly every way. Buses, movie theaters, beaches, hotels, and even graveyards were divided with the choice spots given to whites and the leftovers offered begrudgingly to the black community. The system of separate and unequal was a part of our national identity, inscribed into the fabric of who we were from the days when people of color were brought here involuntarily as slaves and worked to death for generations. White and black America existed side by side, but never on equal terms, and everyone was aware of the deep division. So when those four young black men walked into the

¹ See the BBC World Service podcast, "Witness: Greensboro Four," February 1, 2011 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00d73tl>.

Woolworth's and sat politely down next to all the white folks, it didn't take long for people to become uncomfortable. In Franklin's own words, here is what happened next:

As we took our seats, the waitresses looked in amazement. They had that puzzled look on their face like, *What in the world are they doing here? What are they doing?* And initially the very guise was to ignore us. And then we started to ask for service. And they said to us, "I'm sorry, but we can't serve you here." And we said, "We beg to disagree with you. Why not?" "Well, it's just custom that we don't serve black people at this counter." And I said, "Well, you will agree that the custom is wrong and bad, won't you?" "Well, I didn't make the custom," she says, "it's just the way we do things." "I just can't serve you," she says, "and if you insist, I'll have to get the manager." And he comes out red-faced and puzzled. "What do you boys want?" he asked us. And we said, "We simply want to be served." "Well, I can't serve you here. I can't." We said, "Can't or won't? What is the problem?" "Well, we just don't serve black people at this counter." "Well, why not? Well, do you condone this custom of discrimination?" "Well, I didn't make the custom, you know. I just abide by it, I just go along." "Well, we're asking you to go along with what's fair and what's just." "Well, I just, I simply can't do that."²

So there the four young black men sat. They sat quietly, respectfully, and proudly as the waitresses and the manager denied them service. Each of the young men was aware that they wouldn't be getting a cup of coffee or a lunch plate. All of them knew that they might face violent reprisals for what they were doing. Yet Franklin said that just seconds after he took his seat on that stool he felt better than he had in his whole life. "There's a kind of freedom," he said, "that I had never had before." Once felt, that freedom stirred in Franklin the idea that he need never be treated like anything less than a man again. So when a policeman walked in and began to pace back and forth by the counter, tapping his billy club in his hand as he stared at the young men, Franklin was unmoved. His friends must have felt a similar dignity because none of them budged either. Finally, the flustered officer gave up trying to intimidate them and walked out of the store. That

² Transcribed from "Witness: Greensboro Four."

wasn't the end of the story, of course, but once the story was begun it was as if no one could stop its pages turning.

I think we are all too given to imagine that the men and women of the Civil Rights Movement were exceptional in some way. We hear the stories of their sacrifice, imagine the courage they possessed, and suspect that we could not do those kinds of things. Yet to a person they would tell us that they were not special in any way. Martin Luther King was just a man, a preacher who followed his own message. Rosa Parks was just a woman, a sister who refused to send her self respect to the back of the bus. And Franklin McCain was just a college kid, a kid growing into a man by asking his simple question, "Why not?" Perhaps the one thing that unites all of these figures, and the thousands more whose names we will never know, was a certain salty quality to their faith. For each of them possessed a belief that their individual lives mattered and could do something, a belief that was anything but bland or flavorless. Rather, those who struggled for civil rights had the sort of faith that was sprinkled with dreams, spiced with the longing for freedom. Once tasted, this salty faith couldn't be traded for the stale stuff of the status quo. Of course, there are reasons to consider salty faith, besides simply the shakers that we might imagine sitting idly in front of those four young men as they waited to be served.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Rabbi Jesus speaks in images of salt and light. Jesus' words are beautiful; they follow the famous beginning of the chapter, where he whispers the Beatitudes, a series of blessings on the poor and the grieving, the gentle, the hungry and thirsty, and a litany of the marginalized. Willis Barnstone, the professor of classics at Indiana, writes of Matthew that out of all the gospels, his is given to the

aphoristic and the poetic, offering the closest thing in the Christian Testament to a book of wisdom sayings.³ So Jesus speaks in evocative ways here, ways meant to draw out certain responses, almost as a condiment opens the flavor of a dish. According to Barnstone's own rendering, here is a portion of Jesus' teaching from Matthew:

You are the salt of the earth.
But if the salt has lost its taste, how will it recover its salt?
Its powers are for nothing except to be thrown away
And trampled underfoot by others.

You are the light of the world.
A city cannot be hidden when it is set on a mountain.
Nor do they light a lamp and place it under a basket,
But on a stand,
And it glows on everyone in the house.
So let your light glow before people...⁴

What follows is a series of sayings on the Jewish law as Jesus teaches that he has not come to abolish the religious teachings and the prophets, but to fulfill them through his living and the community of his followers. He adds a knock on the Pharisees, who are straw adversaries set up by the author of Matthew, but, taken in context, Jesus is actually arguing with two groups here; he resists both the violence of armed Jewish zealots and the piety of withdrawn and introspective Pharisees.⁵ Rather, for Rabbi Jesus, any faith worth its salt is both peaceable and political; any faith worth having leads not to violence or withdrawal but to committed and compassionate action in the world. "Be salt," he said. "Be light," he taught. For this world needs the flavor of real faith and the vision of

³ Willis Barnstone, "Introduction to Matthew," *The Restored New Testament: A New Translation with Commentary, Including the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 218.

⁴ Barnstone, *The Restored New Testament*, 230.

⁵ Charles Cook, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 5.13-20," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 335.

bright love more than it needs what it's already got. After all, there are plenty of people all too willing to say, "Well, I didn't make the custom, you know. I just abide by it, I just go along." "Oh, ye of little faith," the rabbi might have said. "Oh, ye of bland faith."

It's enough to make us ask of our own faith. Is it true, I wonder, that we could not be exceptional? Do we really believe that we could not sacrifice for a greater good? Do we really think that our hearts lack the requisite courage? Do we really imagine that we could not do what others have done; namely, find the salty faith to walk into the most broken places in our world and take a seat there, smiling? For the world is now waiting for us, its barstools offered to those who will realize the salt and light they already possess. In the words of ethicist Sharon Welch, "We *are* the ones in charge, in small ways and in large. We are the voters, the parents, the teachers, the owners and managers of business, the investors, the government officials. What do *we* do...?"⁶

The answers will come, I think, only when we look through the eyes of a certain faith. Not a mild faith, mind you. Not a faith so often on display these days, something fashionable and unobtrusive. No, I mean rather the saltier kind, the kind that the rabbi taught and that more than a handful of ordinary people have chosen to follow, however sincerely and however quietly, in ways that began to make a very real difference in the world around them. Such faith is still on offer, its salt and light available in any number of stories being lived right now. We find this faith, for example, in the quiet courage of the undocumented college students sitting in their representatives' offices, asking that they be offered a path to full and equal citizenship. We find this faith in the persistent dignity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers who march to

⁶ Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xx.

county clerk's offices year after year and ask for the equal right to marry. We find this faith in the peaceful demonstrations in Egypt, where Arab sisters and brothers share tea in the streets as they ask for the right to free speech and fair elections. We find this faith in people in every nation who continue, against the odds and the clock, to push for limits on our carbon emissions and newly sustainable policies to ensure the very survival of our planet as its climate changes and tips. There is a salty faith in the world, there is the light of love; it exists wherever people give themselves to their highest aspirations instead of yielding to their lowest impulses, believing that the world can be changed and that they, that *we*, are the ones to do it. It brings us to a closing story, a story with which we might reconsider our own faith and what it is capable of.

On the second day of the Woolworth's sit-in, Franklin and his friends were joined by a number of other students. On the third day, close to fifty students crowded around the lunch counter. By the fourth day, there were far more people than could fit in the store, and the scene began to attract a lot of attention. Some of those attracted were local members of the Ku Klux Klan, who showed up and harassed the peaceful protestors as they sat resolutely at the counter. The Klansmen threw water on the students, they sprayed them with ketchup and mustard, and they even held cigarette lighters to their clothes. Franklin told of a particularly memorable event, a moment that for him may have crystallized how strong his faith had become. As he sat quietly at the counter, two Klansmen approached him and one of them spat directly in his face. Franklin turned toward the Klansman and said, calmly, "I love you because you are my brother." The man looked at him incredulously and then asked his companion if he heard that. The second Klansmen shook his head and said, "I'll see what he says when I do it to him."

Following that, the second man spit on Franklin. Again, Franklin turned to him. “I love you as well because you are my brother, and I will treat you with respect.” “I don’t understand this,” said one of the men. “This is some kind of nut.” And together they left the store. Franklin remained firmly in his seat. Six months later, at that very counter, the tide of history having turned forever, he would be served his lunch.

I wonder if he added some salt. I wonder if the rest of us will. For what the world needs now is not the faith of the mild and the milquetoast, but faith that is like salt and light.

Amen.