

Texts: Matthew 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:1-9a

Article reference: "How to Become a 'Superager'", by Lisa Feldman Barrett, *The New York Times*, December 31, 2016

Around the first of the year, I came across an article about "superagers": persons who are 65 years of age or older who show superior mental functioning in their later years. These persons are not just above average, for their age, in memory retention or in their ability to maintain focus, but they are actually on par with healthy, active 25 year-olds. Want to hear more? How might you become a superager? Studies continue, but so far, the best answer, according to the article is: work hard at something. It could be a physical challenge or a mental one, or some of both. Work hard at something. You heard it first here, superagers, on Super Bowl Sunday!

Our scriptures remind us what to work hard at. And the focus of that work is not, primarily, what happens in here, in worship, or in our own spiritual discipline, specifically identified as fasting in Isaiah, though these things do have value. The hard work that matters is: freeing people from the yoke, releasing people from mistreatment. Sharing bread with the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, clothing the naked. The hard, never ending work of seeing a stranger as a worthy member of our own family. Bringing a light which overcomes the daily darkness of your neighbor. And then, as an outcome of that hard work, Isaiah writes, you will hear the voice of God saying, "I'm here." Spiritual heavy lifting.

Superagers; take 50 hours of training to be a Stephen Minister. Superager; eager to sign up for our trip to Mexico in March. Superager; turning from one's self to another, from inward to outward, from personal concerns to crafting a safe and livable world for persons who are on the fringes and are at risk.

The article goes on to describe the process of launching into something new and different and difficult, like learning a foreign language or how to play a musical instrument. The regions of the human brain which become activated when you work at something unfamiliar have an "intriguing property". The newly tapped brain impulses have a distinctive way of making you feel bad; tired, stuck, frustrated. Experts call this "the yuck" phase. The Marine Corps motto is even quoted in the article: "Pain is weakness leaving the body". The emotional discomfort associated with exertion will, eventually, produce positive results and better functioning, but it doesn't feel good at the time. Superagers know this; they don't let the yuck deter them. The yuck phase is seasoned with hope, perseverance, and faith.

Following Jesus, committing ourselves to God's newness or following a call to go in a different direction, may take us into that "yuck" phase. "I don't fit in." "It's nothing like I thought it would be." "I'm not good at this." "I can't see any results." Just tired, stuck, frustrated. Invigorating our spiritual muscles; developing our kingdom prowess. Dedicated to removing the yuck from the lives of others.

You are the salt of the earth. If salt loses its saltiness, what good is it? Yuck. Insipid is the word I find in the dictionary to identify the unpalatable, tasteless, unappealing poor excuse for unsalted food. We, as followers of Jesus Christ, are not to bring this flavor. No mamby-pamby, mumble-mouth, good-for-nothings. Spicy, flavor-enhancing, delight-injectors, difference-makers are we! Anti-yuck agents!

These days, as I prepare to arrive at the qualifying age for the super-ager competition, I find I can't see salt as well as I used to. Unless the light is really bright, or I put on my reading glasses, I can't see salt crystals coming out of the salt shaker. But I can definitely taste it, transforming the yuck. Be seen is not required; we are the salt of the earth. We've still got a lot of yuck out there.

We scatter, as if we're shaken, as we leave worship, not to be seen, but to re-flavor the places we're sent, and adjust the seasoning of the lives we touch, with God's grace. With bread of life aromas, cup of salvation zest. We do this here, so we can sprinkle Jesus Christ ingredients out there. There's no mistaking this is hard work, and we're never as good at it as we wish we were. We may not be the greatest at forgiving others, nor knowing exactly the right words to speak. We may feel awkward representing Jesus Christ. And we're bound to mess up. But we are salt, of the earth, filled with grace.

And we are the light of the world. These are active verbs, Jesus spoke; present tense. As activated salt, we are invisible flavor changers; transforming yuck to delightful. As silent light shiners, we are revealers of non-verbal truth. "Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ." Can you shine that, without words, through your acceptance, your patient love? It changes everything. "As far as the east is from the west, so far are our sins are forgiven." Shake that one into the life of one who does not know mercy or human kindness.

Early in my ministry, when I served as an Assistant Minister, the pastor of a nearby church called me to fill in for her because she'd come down with the flu. The call came on Saturday night. I threw together a sermon, picked up my robe on the way, and drove out to her church. An elder met me and quickly described the details of the service, which included communion. I led the congregation through the service, preached the sermon, stepped over to the table, broke the bread, gave it to the elders. For the cup, I held up the ceramic pitcher and tipped it to pour the juice into the chalice as I spoke words of institution: this is the cup of salvation, sealed in my blood, poured out for you. As my eyes grew larger, I saw the smiles of the congregation grow wider. I realized, then, that this church didn't use juice in the pitcher for communion. No one told me the cup was empty.

My friends, our cups are not empty. We are fed and filled again by our Savior, who shakes us out from here. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. Don't let the yuck deter nor discourage us, nor define the meaning of our life together. Scatter God's grace, truth, and love. "Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, 'I'm here.'"