**“Salt of the Earth”**

by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

A homily for a Memorial Eucharist

In remembrance of Louise Maglione

Saturday, April 21, 2018

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

I only met Louise once. It was several years ago while she was living for awhile at Brightview Senior Living. I’d been looking for an opportunity to meet her since arriving as rector of St. Paul’s in 2011, and so, while having lunch with another parishioner there in the dining room I asked if she knew who Louise Maglione was. She responded, why yes, that’s her right over there.

So I excused myself, walked over to Louise’s table, and introduced myself as the rector of St. Paul’s, and told her how glad I was to finally meet her. She took a look at me, grabbed my face in her two hands, gave me a big kiss, and said in a loud enough voice for most of the dining room to hear, “Well, aren’t you gorgeous?!?”. Much laughter ensued.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can it’s saltiness be restored?”

Jesus talked a fair amount about salt in the Gospels, especially given that there aren’t any stories about Jesus ever cooking anything. Clearly he knew how important salt was. It’s an essential element for human survival, and, of course, it is the most important seasoning in the kitchen. Salt doesn’t just flavor the food with the taste of salt, rather, the right amount of salt actually brings out more fully the flavors already present in the dish. Of course, if you use too much salt when you cook, as you know, all you taste is salt. But if you use too little salt, the fullness of flavor and texture in all the elements of the food never finds its fullest expression. Each dish has a kind of “optimal” amount of salt that should be used to maximize flavor without overpowering it. Food scientists call that the bliss point.

Even the occasional church-goer would probably recognize the phrase “salt of the earth” and understand it to mean someone who is kind, and humble, and generous of spirit. But the contemporary understanding given to that phrase fails to communicate the fullness of what Jesus meant when said to his disciples, “You are the Salt of the Earth.” Jesus wants those who love him to be salty people. He does not desire quiet and gentle disciples who fade into the background of life. Rather, he means, he wants those who love him to change the flavor of the environment around them, to literally salt the earth. In particular, he wants them, through being the full-self that God made them to be, to bring out more fully the natural flavors of those around them. This is what it means to be salt of the earth. To change the flavor of your environment, your neighborhood, and your world, by bringing out all the tastes and flavors and textures around you that are just waiting to be released. To help your community find its own bliss point.

I wasn’t in Bedford when Louise became our town’s first female selectman in 1974. In fact, I wasn’t even born yet. But when I arrived here in 2011, I came to a town with four women on the board of health, three women school committee members, two women selectmen, a woman moderator…and a partridge in a pear tree. The gifts of women in civic leadership were on full display, and clearly had been for some time. But not for ever. The town was founded in 1729. It took us 245 years until the strength and wisdom and effectiveness of women’s gifts for leadership began to find its fullest expression among us. I have no doubt that Louise stood on the shoulders of women, perhaps generations of them, who led our community in less visible and official ways before her. But I also have no doubt, that it was her saltiness – her energy, her determination, her willingness to take risks, and her ability to bring out the fullness of flavor in those around her, that not only helped her break this particular glass ceiling…but also ensure that it remained broken.

By the early 1980’s, two additional women selectmen had been elected in Bedford. In 1983, Louise’s church, St. Paul’s, called the first full-time female rector in the diocese of Massachusetts. In the nearly four decades since, our town has flourished thanks to the gifts of women’s leadership at every level of our civic, religious, commercial and cultural life. We may not yet have reached the “bliss point” in which all the flavors in our community have found fullest expression in leadership. But it’s clear that many of the hidden flavors that Louise’s saltiness has brought out in our community have been enjoyed, savored even, and continue to be coaxed out by the generations of women leaders who have come since. Not only has our community thrived because of this, but it has also enabled many, many women to find deeper satisfaction for themselves. I have seen even among my own parishioners how meaningful their service in local leadership roles (whether in positions large or small) has been to their own sense of self and life of faith. I can only imagine Louise felt the same way.

Of course, there is much more about Louise’s life to celebrate than this one dimension of it. Louise’s saltiness flavored not just her life of public service, but her intimate life with her family and friends as well. We are blessed this morning to hear the reflections and remembrances from Alex, Judy, Steve and Phil. While we are filled with some natural sadness as we confront the fact that Louise no longer walks among us here on earth, we are also blessed with the private memories and public legacies she has left behind. These remain alive within those of us who cherish them, and allow them to shape our own lives -- to help us become more salty people, too.

And we know that she now shares a new and transformed life deep within the very heart of God. I’m not sure that there are literal pearly gates to walk through when you get to heaven, but if there are, I’m guessing Louise marched right up to St. Peter, grabbed him by the face, gave him a kiss, and said “Aren’t you gorgeous” as she waltzed right in. No doubt, her soul is salting heaven even now -- sharing her spirit, her energy, her love, and her zest for life with all the others saints of God. For this, and for the many years of life she shared so fully with those in this room, we give thanks to God. Amen.