Charlie Brown once again is offered the chance to kick the football Lucy obligingly holds upright.

“Oh, I won’t pull the ball away, Charlie Brown.
I promise you. I give you my bonded word.”
All right, mutters Charlie.
He gives himself a pep talk:
“I believe that people who want to change can do so,
and I believe that they should be given a chance to prove themselves. So here goes . . . ”
Aaugh! Whump!
(Pastors need a football story to tell on SBS.)
We all want to give the world another chance but the world never comes through.
Even when we want to do the right thing – the righteous thing, in Biblical language – forces like Lucy van Pelt conspire against us.
Like poor ol’ humble Charlie Brown, we keep trying, whether it’s the season for football, or baseball, or flying a kite.
I think of Charlie Brown when I hear Jesus say, ‘You are the salt of the earth.’
No, not in the colloquial meaning of ‘you are a good man, Charlie Brown.’ That’s not what Jesus means.
It’s the side of Charlie Brown that is always persecuted and rejected.
Hear last week’s portion of the Sermon/ Mount, the passage that begins with beatitudes and ends with:
“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account.”
When you hear “You are the salt of the earth,” think of Charlie Brown.
The metaphor is unique to Jesus in Matthew. It probably refers to prophets’ blood.
Earth does not produce salt.

Earth doesn’t tolerate salt, in fact.
But the Old Testament is replete with stories of bloodied earth.
After the slaying of Abel, the Lord says to Cain, “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the earth. So now you are banned from the ground that has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood. (Gen. 4:11)
In another sermon much later in Matthew, Jesus will preach woe to Scribes and Pharisees (the original S & P 5000):
Upon them will run all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of the prophet Zechariah (Mt 23:35).
In other words blood is what makes earth salty. The earth is “soiled,” pun intended, but more than that, purified and sanctified with the blood of the righteous persecuted.
Salt of the earth describes the dangerous business the disciples are about.
I wonder if Charles Schulz had this in mind in creating a persecuted, righteous Charlie Brown. His ongoing football fiasco suggests as much.
Jesus continues the metaphor: “But if salt loses its taste, what can make it salty again?” It’s worthless.
Translation: You may lose your savor, little by little, without realizing it.
If so, you are of less value to the Kingdom of God.
A disciple must keep salting the earth, with blood, sweat, and tears.
Keep on trying to kick that ball, Charlie Brown.
In a strip from Sept. 9, 1959, Charlie confides to Linus.

“Life is just too much for me,”
“I’ve been confused right from the day I was born.
I think the whole trouble is that we’re thrown into life too fast ...
We’re not really prepared.”
With the wisdom of childhood,
Linus turns to Charlie and asks:
“What did you expect –
a chance to warm up first?”
We start out confused … but life never slows down.
We’re always messing up, then stepping up again.
We’re kind of stubborn, that way.
Maybe the reason we come to worship
is to find a place where life is slowed down a bit
and things are familiar and predictable,
giving us a chance to warm up for life’s challenges
in a safe setting.

Stubbornness is a motif of the Old Testament.
Moses led a stubborn people through wilderness.
They were always backsliding, angering God.
In Deut. 9:6, an exasperated Moses warns,
“Know, then, that the LORD your God
is not giving you this good land to occupy
because of your righteousness;
for you are a stubborn people.”
Whatever the reason for our stubborn streak,
Jesus is subverting it in his Sermon on the Mount.
He preaches to the Charlie Brown in all of us.
His sermon taps into our fatalistic selves.
Last week, we heard, Blest are the poor in spirit.
Blest are those who mourn.
Blest are the humble.
Blest are the peacemakers.
We puff ourselves up with each successive blessing:
Yes, we are humble. Yes, we are merciful.
Oh yes, our hearts are pure.
Why yes, we work hard for peace.
Then suddenly the oxygen gets rather thin:
Blest are they who are persecuted for doing right.
Did I hear you correctly, Jesus?
Persecuted? Good grief.
Charlie seeks help from Lucy’s 5 cent booth:
“I can’t help it. I feel lonely and depressed …”

Lucy’s advice is harsh but true:
“You should be ashamed of yourself,
Charlie Brown.
You’ve got the whole world to live in!
There’s beauty all around you.
There are things to do,
great things to be accomplished.”
Charlie takes this all in.
“You’re right, Lucy! You’re right!
You’ve made me see things differently.
I realize now that I am part of this world.”
With a big grin in the next panel, he concludes,
“I am not alone … I have friends!”
Name one, Lucy purrs.

We start out confused … we never catch up.
We keep messing up and stepping up, stubbornly.
Discipleship comes at a cost.
“The prophets were persecuted in just this way.
“You, my friends, are the salt of the earth.”
I interpret the phrase this way:
The disciples are salt.
They season whatever they’re put into.
They go to work in the juice, making it savory.
They bring out the best in other ingredients.
Disciples, if they’re worth their salt,
make a noticeable difference in the world.
Have you ever heard such good news?
Be salt! Even you, Charlie Brown.
Season the earth, with your blood if necessary.
And be happy about it! Be very happy!

Our reading from Isaiah warns
that we must not confuse discipleship
with superficial piety.
We’ve known people who worshiped regularly
and occasionally dropped money in the plate.
They went through the motions of religiosity.
But there was a disconnect between their
religious behavior and their moral behavior.
Acting religious in itself does not satisfy God.
Fasting, for example, is not a talisman to ward off God’s anger or to impress God. Fasting is a protest against systems of power and exploitation that weigh people down. Withdrawal from meals is no substitute for moral protest against the injustices of state. To practice faith, advises Isaiah, is to harness a force of nature, like concentrated sunlight: Your faith must blaze out like the dawn. Justice must shine forth like a healing ray. Then the glory of God will rise behind you.

Jesus returns the next day to the mountain to continue the sermon where Isaiah leaves off. “You, my friends, are the light of the world!”

You, my Hebrew cousin ...
You, my Roman neighbor ...
You, my Phoenician friend ...
You are light. You are made of the stuff of stars. Your cells combust the energy of a thousand suns. In your eyes flare a thousand noble thoughts. Each beat of your pulse sends waves of enlightenment across millions of light-years. You are the light of the cosmos, all of you. Even you, the downtrodden Charlie Brown. Let this sink in to your dispirited psyches. You may wonder if you’re up to such a task. You may shiver at the import of your one-ness with all matter, all energy, all creation. God has made us that powerful. Jesus speaks a command directly to our light: Shine ahead of the people; so that they may see the good you do and praise your Maker. Shine, little light, shine! Shimmer with hope. Radiate the truth of God’s love for all creation.

Keep glowing against the dread and darkness. In salt and light are all we need to know (and do) to be Christ’s disciples. Disciples have to salt the earth with sacrifice. Disciples have to illumine people’s consciences. It’s a tall order.

Charlie Brown gets one last question, again to Lucy’s little brother, Linus.

So you think the world is getting better? Well, if you’re that confident the world’s getting better, how come you hang on to that blanket?

Indeed.

I brought with me today a salt lamp. It’s a carved bowl of natural salt rock with loose salt-rocks of various impurities on top. This little light of my wife’s combines two metaphors: salt and light. Next to “Jesus loves me, this I know,” the most beloved song of children’s church is “This Little Light.”

This little light of mine,
I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I’m gonna let it shine.

Since we were kids, we’ve been proclaiming this gospel text.
The light that I am is God-light, not my light. I don’t shine. I just let God shine in me. To let God’s light shine means to reveal in our actions the powerful God who is merciful, just, and compassionate.

CONCLUSION
This evening during the big game we will be dazzled, amused, enlightened,
and perplexed, maybe by football,
but certainly by commercials.
Each spot will try to outshine its competitors.
Each sponsor believes their message
makes a significant difference in peoples' lives.
Can we say the same for our faith?
In this post-Christian environment,
the church no longer exercises the most influence
over the moral agenda of the nation.
The church is no longer salty.
The church is no longer the prophetic laser light.
If Christianity is not to be smashed under-foot,
it cannot afford to hide its light under a bushel.
We have a mission as a distinct community,
in the world, but not of the world,
independent of popular influences,
with a mandate to shine God’s light
on the world’s darkness.
Are we up to the task?
This little light of mine.
I’m gonna let it shine.
*Let it shines. Let it shine. Let it shine!*
Amen.