

“Being Salt and Light”

Matthew 5:13-16

Message November 6 2022

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In today’s scripture reading, Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and as I looked into the various meanings and history of salt, I realized that there is so much rich information, and I want to share some of it with you as we explore this familiar Bible Wisdom teaching. These are excerpts of an article written for Time magazine by their staff way back in 1982. ;)

Salt comes from dead, dried-up seas or living ones. It can bubble to the surface as brine or crop out in the form of salt licks and shallow caverns. Below the skin of the earth, it lies in white veins, some of them thousands of feet deep. It can be evaporated from salt “pans,” boiled down from brine, or mined, as it often is today, from shafts extending half a mile down.

The history of the world according to salt is simple: animals wore paths to salt licks; [people] followed; trails became roads, and settlements grew beside them. When the human menu shifted from salt-rich game to [grains], more salt was needed to supplement the diet. But the underground deposits were beyond reach, and the salt sprinkled over the surface was insufficient. Scarcity kept the mineral precious. As civilization spread, salt became one of the world’s principal trading commodities.

As early as the 6th century, in the sub-Saharan, Moorish merchants routinely traded salt ounce for ounce for gold. In Abyssinia, slabs of rock salt, called ‘amôlés, became the coin of the realm. Each one was about ten inches long and two inches thick. Cakes of salt were also used as money in other areas of central Africa.

Not only did salt serve to flavor and preserve food, it made a good antiseptic, which is why the Roman word for these [beneficial] crystals (sal) is a first cousin to Salus, the goddess of health. Of all the roads that led to Rome, one of the busiest was the Via Salaria, the salt route, over which Roman soldiers marched and merchants drove oxcarts full of the precious crystals up the Tiber from the salt pans at Ostia. A soldier’s pay—consisting in part of salt—came to be known as

solarium argentum, from which we derive the word salary. A soldier's salary was cut if he "was not worth his salt," a phrase that came into being because the Greeks and Romans often bought slaves with salt.

Because of its use as a preservative, salt became a token of permanence to the Jews of the Old Testament. Its use in Hebrew sacrifices as a meat purifier came to signify the eternal covenant between God and Israel.

During the Middle Ages, the ancient sanctity of salt slid toward superstition. The spilling of salt was considered ominous, a portent of doom. After spilling salt, the spiller had to cast a pinch of it over his left shoulder because the left side was thought to be sinister, a place where evil spirits tended to congregate.

And if this weren't enough information to write your own research paper, I learned from one of our parishioners that Native Americans often brokered peace among tribes by sharing salt – as they gathered in a circle for arbitration, they would pass around a bowl of salt from which each person would take a taste, and this practice sealed the intention that they would maintain peace throughout their negotiations.

To broaden our understanding about the importance and history of salt still further:

[There is even a] social symbolism of salt. As late as the 18th century, the rank of guests at a banquet was gauged by where they sat in relation to an often elaborate silver salt cellar on the table. The host and "distinguished" guests sat at the head of the table—"above the salt." People who sat below the salt, farthest from the host, were of little consequence.

Salt taxes variously solidified or helped dissolve the power of governments. As late as 1930, in protest against the high British tax on salt in India, Mahatma Gandhi led a mass pilgrimage of his followers in what is known as The Salt March, as an act of nonviolent civil disobedience that covered 240 miles and lasted 24 days.

If the importance of a food to a society can be measured by the allusions to it in language and literature, then the significance of salt is virtually unrivaled. Nearly four pages of the Oxford English Dictionary are taken up by references

to salt, more than any other food. As we explore today's text and think about how it speaks to us today, let us carry these stories of salt with us.

All of this enables us to hear how powerfully Jesus' metaphor continues to speak to us today. Last week we heard the text from the beginning of chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel – the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as the multitudes gather before Jesus to hear his teachings, in awe of his miracles. As we heard last week, Jesus speaks what we know as the "Beatitudes," standing our world on its head. We believe in personal pride; Jesus blesses poverty of spirit. We seek pleasure; Jesus blesses those who mourn. We see the prosperity of aggressive people; Jesus blesses the meek. We love good food and drink; Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Today we hear Jesus continue in his address to the crowds, and by extension to us: "You are the salt of the earth." Salt has little influence while sitting in a saltshaker. However, it is of great value once it is mixed, in the right proportions, in our food. When it is sprinkled on food—or, better yet, cooked into food—it transforms the food. So also, if we sit alone in the comfort of our own homes, we're unlikely to make much of a difference in the world.

Jesus warns us not to be complacent. If salt loses its taste, it becomes worthless. Salt cannot change its chemical composition, but it does lose taste and value if adulterated. In Jesus' day, much salt was recovered from the Dead Sea and was blended with various substances. At some point, it could become so degraded that people would discard the salt as worthless.

The same holds for the light we each carry within us – are we hiding it under a bushel? Are we ignoring it or feeling insecure about letting it shine? Is someone else constantly trying to snuff it out? Or are we striving to remain centered in our truth and rooted in our spiritual gifts? Are we sharing our light and trusting that the light is shining where it is most needed?

This week during Zoom worship, as a gathered group shared their wisdom, one person said something that really caught my ear: this text is really a "pep talk" from Jesus – he's encouraging us while pointing out what is our job, what is our responsibility.

After Jesus points out the principles of his teachings through the Beatitudes, he speaks to how those principles can be lived out. Jesus tells us that the

elements we need – salt and light – are within us. God has equipped us, so now, Jesus says, “go out and do it!” If we are awake to what we carry within us and are willing to share it, we naturally make a difference. Think about it: if we each lived into our spiritual gifts, every need in this world would be attended to!

I invite us now to take some time for reflection and consider the following queries from Rev. Jan Richardson:

- ❖ How savory are you these days?
- ❖ How is light finding its way into you and through you?
- ❖ Is there anything – or anyone – that is working against this, that is tipping a bushel over your shining?
- ❖ Might there be some part of you that needs revealing, needs to unhide itself in this season?