

## **HAVE SALT IN YOURSELVES AND BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER**

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 29, 2024

Mark recorded Jesus' words this way: "Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

Like most of you, Desiree and I have a variety of spices in our kitchen. To the left of the stove in an overhead cabinet we have cummin and garlic and onion and cinnamon and celery and ginger and basil and coriander and many others. But we also have three additional spices that sit down on the counter right next to the stove so they can be easily reached, because we often use them more than the others. They are salt, pepper, and red pepper flakes. Now, to be fair to my wife and her sensitive taste buds, I'm the only one in the household who reaches for the red pepper flakes. Along with having salt and pepper shakers in our kitchen, we also have a set on our dining room table. They are shaped like the outer shell of a sea urchin.

Now some people, after sitting down to eat in front of their plate of food have been known to immediately reach for the saltshaker before they even taste to see how salty the food is. Any of you want to confess to engaging in that behavior?! Well, I will confess. I have been known to do that upon occasion. You have to be careful in pouring salt. On more than one occasion I have grabbed a saltshaker and turned it over to shake it out only to watch in horror as it quickly pours out in a stream all over the food!

Let me give you a little history lesson on this condiment. Salt has been mined for millennia. Long ago it was mined south of the Dead Sea and in the surrounding hills. That salt was not of the highest quality. There were often other minerals mixed in, like gypsum. Because of this lower quality of

salt, the inhabitants of Palestine would often purchase purer forms of salt from passing traders from the north and the east.

Along with being used to flavor foods, in its purest form salt has been used as a form of currency. It has also been a vital mineral the body needs to replenish the salt lost through perspiration. It has also been used to preserve food. Because salt has been necessary to keep food from decay, it has been seen as a symbol for purity and incorruptibility, especially among the ancient Semitic people. A little salt was used in the ratification of contracts, or to seal a friendship. Ancient conflicts would conclude with a meal consisting of bread and salt as a symbol of friendship. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel was spoken of in the Book of Numbers as a “covenant of salt”.

The Hebrew scriptures tell us that all animal sacrifices were to be purified with salt. There is an ancient Roman custom of placing a few grains of salt on the lips of an infant on the 8th day after birth to chase away the demons. In the ancient Christian church there was a practice of offering blessed salt to catechumens as part of the rite of baptism. A little sprinkled salt may also be used in the preparation of Holy Water.

Now, that’s a lot of information about this common household spice. But it helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he referred to salt. “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” There is a little tension evident in this statement that I will return to later. Salt is not only good for us in moderation, but at times it can be necessary for our survival. Salt is good, Jesus said. But what if it has become corrupted, defiled, and mixed with other minerals?

What happens if salt that is supposed to add zest and enhancement and flavor to food, suddenly becomes impure and ineffective? Matthew's gospel says it this way: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." You and I as followers of Jesus have been placed here to be pure salt, to be a flavorful additive to our world.

During the second and third centuries the early followers of Jesus were trying to figure out what Jesus had left them on earth to accomplish. They must have felt cut off from Jesus's comforting presence and his further instructions and wisdom. Thankfully the Holy Spirit did come in great power to aid them in their work of bringing the reign of God to the world around them, to enable them to be the salt Jesus had called them to be.

Twenty years after Jesus' death, it was a dangerous time to live in Palestine. There was a widespread Jewish revolt against the Roman oppressors. Tensions were high. The Jesus followers had to quickly decide where they would take a stand. Should they side with the rebellion, or side with those who chose to appease Rome, or should they chart some third path. What were they supposed to do to be God's prophetic and loving salt and light in their world?

They knew without a doubt that they were not called to pick up their pitchforks against Rome. Jesus had shown them a different way, a way of bold, active NONviolence. Engaging in a bloody revolt was not the way of Jesus. On the other hand, would Jesus want them to side with the Jewish priests and other religious and civic leaders in seeking to appease Rome? They knew that this was not their way either. There were too many things in the Roman imperial system that were antithetical to the ways of Jesus and the reign of God. They would have to chart some third path. And this they did, and as a result, many in society were drawn to the way of Jesus. This

new faith multiplied and grew in popularity and influence. The salt they were called to be, was indeed providing a flavorful influence on the various societies and cultures throughout the Mediterranean and the peoples of the east.

This influence caused the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 380CE to issue the Edict of Thessalonica, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. With this new legal status, the followers of Jesus had more freedom to proclaim God's reign, to be God's salt. But this freedom also brought many new challenges. What would it now look like to be the salt of God, to usher in the reign of God, when, instead of being a marginalized persecuted Jewish sect, these Jesus communities now had official status in the Roman Empire.

As each year gave way to another, and each decade flowed into another, a slow subtle transformation occurred. A blending began to take place; a melding between the secular and sacred realms; between civic and religious society, between the kingdoms of man and the kingdom of God.

This syncretism slowly brought about compromise among the followers of Jesus. The most notable shift occurred with their relationship to military service. During the first two centuries it had been anathema for any follower of Jesus to join the Roman military. But now, as the official religion of the state, some Christians began to take up arms. This blending and blurring of the lines between the civic and religious grew to the point where eventually Christian armies went out on Crusades to conquer heathen nations. The inquisitions became another tool of the religious institution to root out heresy. These tactics and others would have been absolutely anathema to Jesus, and his teaching and example; antithetical to his transformational way of love.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” And then Jesus ends with these words: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” The book of Colossians says it this way: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” As you and I allow ourselves to be transformed by God into the image of Jesus, we will be a salty, powerful, and flavorful loving force in the world around us; caring and loving and healing and transforming.

Of all the many qualities of salt, it is also a pungent spice. And here’s where the tension comes in with Jesus’ statement. He ends with these words: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” Being salt will not always lead to peace. Salt is meant to add to and transform everything it touches. When you and I as Jesus followers, bring something new and flavorful into people’s lives, it may at times challenge and disrupt their status quo. It was this way with Jesus’ message during his time on earth. He was God’s salt to the people around him. Many people joyfully received what he flavorfully offered them. But many others were not willing to receive this new teaching; to be open to transformation. For these people, the “salt” that Jesus brought was just too pungent! Jesus said, be salt, and be at peace. Sometimes we can be salt and bring peace. But there are times when people will not receive the loving and flavorful salt we offer them. To them, it may be just too pungent. This salt for them will not bring peace.

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” The closer you and I draw to Christ, the saltier our lives will be, and the greater the opportunity for us to be a flavorful influence in people’s lives. Our ancient brothers and sisters chose not the way of rebellion or the way of appeasement, but chose a glorious and loving and transformative and prophetic third way. They chose to carry the Roman soldiers pack a third mile. They handed over their spare coat.

And just like them, we choose not rebellion or appeasement, but a glorious and loving and transformative and prophetic third way. We see no longer human or animal or plant or mineral, but the divine light within all. We see neither enemy or friend, Christian or Muslim, conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican. We see the divine light of the image of God within all, and we call forth that light. We see the wound in the sap of a tree and bring healing and call forth the light. We plant a baby staghorn coral at the bottom of the ocean and call forth the light. This morning, I called forth the light in a dear African American brother behind McDonald's window as he testified to the light. I called forth the light in a dear sister at Seven-11, who testified to the light.

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”