

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "Are You a Little or a Lot Salty?"

Matthew 5:13-20

February 4-5, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Once upon a time, I was a chaplain at Washington Hospital Center in D.C. At lunchtime members of our pastoral care department ate lunch together in the cafeteria. If our priest colleague, Jack Wintermeyer, got to the table before us, the salt shaker would invariably be missing. Besides for being a priest and hospital chaplain, Jack was also a certified Physician's Assistant, and took his friends' cardiac health very much to heart 😊.

When it comes to heart health, salt has a bad rep, doesn't it? It does raise blood pressure, after all. But anyone on a low-salt diet probably doesn't **celebrate** that fact; you do it because you **have** to, not because you **want** to. Salt adds so much **flavor** to cuisine of any kind. Maybe some of you have read the book or watched the Netflix series *Salt Fat Acid Heat*. Great cooking show. 'Sings the praises of salt, definitely! Show-and-Tell from the kitchen across the street: Kosher salt, La Baleine coarse sea salt (for the salt mill), Maldon sea salt flakes, garlic salt, onion salt, homemade basil salt and dill salt, porcini and salt, fiori and salt, saffron and salt, truffle and salt, fennel and salt. So much goodness, so much variety, a salt for every occasion 😊. (I'm allowed: my blood pressure runs low!)

But salt isn't only **flavor**. What other uses can **you** think of for salt?

- Salt **melts** ice (pretty important, with temperatures like this weekend's!); salt also helps ice cream freeze and whipping cream whip.
- Salt **preserves** things, like meat and fish. It reduces moisture, so it lessens bacteria breeding grounds. It also helps to kill bacteria directly. Ancient Egyptians used salt in the mummification process: 1 kind of salt for the rich and another kind for the poor.
- Salt will remove some stains from fabric, and it can be used to scour things clean. I seem to remember a hint from Heloise about removing rust stains by sprinkling the cloth with salt and lemon juice, and leaving it in the sun.
- Salt is an insulator. Archaeologists have unearthed ancient ovens with a foundation of salt to retain heat.
- Salt was believed to increase fertility. In the Middle Ages, the shoes of German brides were sprinkled with salt. There are also woodcuts of German wives salting their husbands!
- The Romans described someone in love as *salax*, "salted." (It's where we get the not so nice word "salacious," meaning indecent, crude, lewd.)
- In the old days, Roman soldiers were paid in salt instead of cash. That's where we get the saying, "Earn your salt!" It's also where we get the word "salary," payment for work. That's how valuable salt was: for a long time it was a form of currency, money.

Salt is essential to life. We humans can't live without it. I read that an average adult's body holds about 250 grams of salt, 3 or 4 salt shakers full.¹ But we lose it through bodily secretions, including tears, which we know are salty. Dogs lick us, not **just** because they love us, but because we're salty, especially after a run or in the summer! But our bodies don't manufacture salt. We need to ingest it. So do other mammals, like deer. There are no salt shakers in the forest, so they go to a salt lick, land next to a body of water where the salt has dried and accumulated.

In ancient Judaism, salt was a necessary ingredient to make a covenant with God, a mutually binding promise. Temple sacrifices had to include salt. In both Judaism and Islam, salt was used to "seal a deal" because salt is constant and even if it temporarily changes it reverts back to its original self. We put salt on an icy sidewalk and as it works it seems to disappear, but once the melted ice dries up the sidewalk is powdered with salt.

Because of its **actual** ability to preserve things and its **purported** ability to drive off evil spirits, in some cultures newborn babies were bathed in salt water to keep them safe. Water itself was believed to exorcise demons, like in *The Wizard of Oz* when the Wicked Witch of the West is melted by a bucket of water. This is why water is used in baptism, too: it symbolizes cleansing from original sin, the drowning of the old self, but also the casting out of any spirit other than the Holy Spirit. So water and salt is an especially powerful combo! Part of the baptismal ritual used to be the placing of a few grains of salt on the tongue of the newly baptized: preservation unto everlasting life, but also a reminder of Jesus' revelation to us in today's Gospel:

"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 under foot." (Matthew 5:13)

Some of the younger members of our faith family use an expression to describe someone who's irritated: "She was a little bit salty." (I picture someone who's grimacing or wincing after eating something with too much salt.) Well, as Christians we're called to be a **lot** salty, but in a different sense! What does it mean for **us** to be the salt of the earth? (Jesus **is** using the plural "you" here; Matthew's Gospel emphasizes that being a disciple means being **in community** for the sake of the world. There are

no such things as Lone Ranger Christians going it alone in the Gospels. To be a Christian is to be a member of the Body of Christ, gathering regularly to worship, to learn, to serve and to play.) What does it mean for **us** to be the salt of the earth, to be salty for Christ?

- We are to add **zest** to the world. Sticking with our kitchen metaphors, have you ever “zested” a lemon or an orange? This cool little kitchen tool is like a micro-potato peeler. It scrapes the very, very outside of the lemon or the orange skin into fine, wispy flakes so only the lovely colored peel and not the bitter white pith brightens a recipe. (Nutrition note: webmd.com reports: “But the pith is full of calcium, fiber, vitamin C, and immune-boosting flavonoids. Throw the pith in a smoothie to hide the flavor but get all the benefits.” Citrus is so clean, so bright. That’s why it’s such a popular fragrance for kitchen cleansers, dish detergent, hand soap, candles.

As Christians we are called to flavor the world with faith, to brighten it, make it zesty with joy. A joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms. One of my favorite quotes: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Someone has said that maybe describing us as cayenne pepper or habañero would communicate better the effect we and our Christian community are supposed to have on the world: issuing a continual, sometimes even **jolting** wake-up call about our individual and corporate failures in love, our society’s disregard and apathy toward the last, the lost and the least, our frequent need to acknowledge that, as Mufasa said to Simba in *The Lion King*, “You are more than you have become.” Do something about it! “Stand up and fly right!” Live out in your actions the faith that you profess with your words.

Here’s the paraphrase of “*You are the salt of the earth*” from *The Message*:

¹³ “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.”

When this Gospel first hit the airwaves, back in the 1st century, people who had lost their saltiness were those who had denied or abandoned the faith. They were called apostates. Maybe they had burnt incense in front of a statue of the Roman emperor and mumbled, “Caesar is lord!” instead of standing fast in the faith, refusing to honor any false god, and clearly stating, “Jesus is Lord.” Or maybe they had grown complacent and slipped back into the ways of the world instead of following the Way (with a capital W)

that Jesus sets out for His disciples. We're not in danger of literally worshipping physical false gods, but it's a real temptation to make choices the world expects rather than the ones Jesus commands.

Later in the church year we'll hear the parable of the sower and the seed, also from Matthew's Gospel. We'll be told that the seed of the Word sometimes germinates and sprouts immediately, then gets strangled by the cares of this world. If we allow that to happen in our lives, we'll lose our saltiness. And then, "*how will people taste godliness?*" The coming of the kingdom of heaven isn't a one person show produced by God and starring only Jesus. Heaven knows why, but Heaven chooses to use us in this divinely inspired "production" as primary actors, stage crew, public relations team, ushers, and concession stand workers who hand out the **salted**, buttered popcorn ☺. Each of us has a role to play. Every family of faith has a role to play. Part of our role in this community is providing leaders for Furniture Bank, Family Promise and food pantry ecumenical ministries. Some of the "zest" we add is creating and participating in many conversations with local congregations of other denominations. St. John says that the night before He died our Lord prayed that we may all be one. How can Christians be the salt of the earth if we aren't even talking to and serving with one another?

In this little book that Ted Hall lent me, entitled *Salt: A World History*, the author Mark Kurlansky writes:

Salt is so common, so easy to obtain, and so inexpensive that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilization until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history.²

A faith-filled, faithful, salt-of-the-earth Christian is one of the most sought-after commodities in the kingdom of heaven, under construction among us. Let's add the zest of joy, a jolt of holy accountability, and intense God-flavor to all that we do, wherever we do it. By God's grace, may we "earn our salt" in the kingdom of heaven. May we be **a lot** salty. Amen

¹ Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (NY, Penguin, 2002), p. 6.

² Ibid.