



Sermon on the Mount: Salt & Light Matthew 5:13-16

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Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As some of you know, last week I took advantage of the paid time off that I have been graciously offered by the church, and took off for a little Sabbath expedition in Vermont. I got to visit with some new friends from the Iona Community; and I drove around Middlebury, Montpelier, Stowe, and just about everywhere in between. I feel like there are still some Vermonters wondering why this Tennessee license plate was driving on the mountains at, like, 30 miles per hour, at top speed, but as seems to be their style, the Vermont people seemed fine to live and let live and mostly put up with me.

And on my last night, I went to dinner at Hen of the Wood in Burlington. It's a lovely, rustic restaurant named after this particular mushroom called, well, hen of the woods, and since it was just me I got a seat at the bar right in front of the chefs so I could watch them grilling steaks and shucking oysters and roasting vegetables, and I was right next to the expediter. And the expediter is the person who gets all the orders in, and tells the chefs when to "fire" something, or to start preparing it. They are the person who coordinates all the food getting prepared in order, and then double checks everything right before it gets served at the table.

And so all night I listened to this expediter say, "Fire halibut, fire two hanger steaks," or whatever, and then the chefs would call back, "firing steaks, chef!" – and I got to watch them prepare every single dish that went to a table that night. After a little while I noticed two things: first, that I should order the pancetta because it looked amazing. And second, before every dish left for a table, the expediter would take a look at it, maybe send it back to the chefs if it needed something, maybe wipe down the edges with a napkin to make everything look clean, and then, the very last thing he would do – he would sprinkle it with a little kosher salt. That was the final touch, the last thing to

be done before a plate went out into the world. And only the expediter, the person who had the final say, could drop that little sprinkle of salt before it was perfect.

These days we might not always think about the importance of salt, but of course, that hasn't always been the case. In the book *Salt: A World History*,¹ Mark Kurlansky tells an incredibly complex story about salt. Salt is important for the preservation of food of course, but salt also has political and social implications. It was the salt tax in India that inspired Gandhi to start the rebellion that led to India's independence. Marco Polo may or may not have discovered noodles in China, but he definitely found a sophisticated salt industry there. Even our war of Independence was partly incited by salt shortages. The West Indian slave trade? Underwritten by sales of salt, more so than by molasses or rum. And of course, anyone from around these parts can probably tell me a whole lot more than I know about the salt mines in the Finger Lakes, and the Salt City of Syracuse.

In 1920 a salt company listed 101 uses for salt, from "keeping the colors bright on boiled vegetables" to "making ice cream freeze," "removing rust," "sealing cracks," "cleaning bamboo furniture" and "killing poison ivy." And that's not to mention all the medicinal applications, like treating "sprains, sore throats and earaches." But that's only a fraction of potential uses. Today, Kurlansky writes, the salt industry can claim 14,000 uses for its product.

And of course salt is not just a cultural phenomenon but a biological necessity. Salt is present in almost every part of the human body and the fluids it produces. It's needed to propel oxygen through the blood and move our muscles, including the heart. We simply cannot live without it.

However, "after recounting thousands of years of blood and sweat over salt, Kurlansky notes that most of what is mined today goes for de-icing roads in wintertime. A commodity that was once so valuable it was used as currency has become cheap enough to blanket highways and support the cult of the car. That fact is meant to be the final salt shocker. What is much more disconcerting, though, is that Americans today, with the freshest and broadest food supply in history, eat more than twice as much salt on average as Europeans did at the height of their dependence on food salted for preservation... So even with something as ubiquitous as salt, sometimes there can be too much of a good thing."²

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/Salt-World-History-Mark-Kurlansky/dp/0142001619>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/24/books/nacl.html>

And so when we think about the rich history of salt, and its power, how it can be both corrosive and life-giving, how there are almost as many uses of salt as there are places and people around the world, then it makes sense as to why Jesus would compare us to salt in this very famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard Jesus's first lesson, his first class, as he begins the teaching portion of his ministry. He starts with the Beatitudes which speak of blessings, especially upon those who aren't so used to being blessed. And after that, things shift a bit and Jesus moves into the next lecture. He goes from talking about how God has blessed us to what we are to do with that blessing.

You are the salt of the earth, he says. OK, what does that mean? Well, first thing to know is that he isn't talking about you as in *you*, he's talking about us. "Each time he uses the word "you" in this passage, he is actually using the plural form of that word, which we don't have in English...unless, of course, you're from the South. So he is saying, "Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world. Let y'all's light so shine before others." In other words, it is not each person's ability to shine that Jesus is focusing on, but their power as a collective."³

And, if we take Jesus literally, if we are like salt, then we have to think about ourselves through all of the properties, the functions, the uses of salt. That means that, well, we are complicated. As salt, we have to think of ourselves as something important throughout the whole world, something valuable, something we have to have to survive. But we also have to remember that being salt can mean that we, the followers of Christ, can be corrosive, that sometimes too much of us can be too good of a thing, and that we can be mined and exploited and used for ill-gotten gains by others.

If Christians are the salt of the earth, then we can think of ourselves, our churches and congregations as the necessary preservative of history, a place where the traditions of the past are upheld. But we can also think of church as a commodity that was once so valuable it was used as currency, but now has become cheap and common, used to pave the roadways of progress, industry, politics and commerce.

If we are salt then we remember that we have been used to poison the fields of our enemies, that we have fought wars over ourselves, and built and torn down infrastructure for our own sake. But we also remember that as salt, we are a part of everything that is and moves and lives, an integral part of the world that keeps the blood pumping and the heart beating. Christians have many uses, many functions,

³ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Phillip-Martin-Salt-and-Light-1.pdf>

many actions in the world, some for good and some for bad. But it does seem, as Christ tells us, that world simply cannot be without the salt of our lives.

And while Jesus is being metaphorical here, he is not being theoretical, right. I mean, we can all probably think of times and places where the church has been corrosive in our lives, when people in and out of the church have attempted to use it for their own purposes. This is the part of the sermon where I would usually insert a story to describe in concrete fashion this experience, but I mean, I honestly couldn't pick one! I think all of us, even if we love our church family and have for a very long time, all of us can think back to a time when it felt like the church was weighing on us, corroding our lives, even making us sick. And even if magically somehow you have had only positive experiences in the church, try going out into the world these days and mentioning to someone else that you're a Christian, that you have Christian values, that you are a follower of Christ? I mean, what do you think they would automatically assume about you? That you are kind, generous, that you try to live by the Golden Rule? Maybe. But they might also assume that you're homophobic, that you're actively part of a social institution that perpetuates injustice rather than providing liberation, that you're just an idiot for a profession of faith, or the only reason your church exists is because it doesn't pay taxes.

Even when I was sitting at the bar at Hen of the Wood, next to the expediter and chatting with the lovely chef who was preparing my hen of the wood mushrooms, she asked me what I did for work, and I say, "I'm a pastor," and she looked at me as if I had said "I'm a basketball," just completely flummoxed. And so I felt like I needed to say, "I mean, like the liberal kind, not the kind that hates gay people and stuff," and she just kind of smiled and went back to work.

But this is the experience of many people out there in the world. There was just an article about this in the Auburn Citizen a few days ago.⁴ This growing group of people do not see Christians as the spice of life providing care and preservation. No, they see us, our faith, our institutions as corrosive – and these are not people who believe in God! These are people who profess a faith, who understand a higher purpose exists, who want to have spiritual connection – but they do not see the church as the place for that work to be done, in part because that has been their lived experience. They have tasted our dishes, they have experienced our preservation, and have found that it's

⁴ https://auburnpub.com/life-entertainment/nation-world/faith-values/nonreligious-united-states-nonespirituality-humanist/article_82e06548-5f88-5281-ad6f-1e277df98e5a.html

sickening. They have walked through the fields of their life and found it covered in salt so that nothing could grow – salt that was intentionally left there by Christians.

So then the question is, if salt can be both good and bad, depending on how and when it's used, then how can we keep from being corrosive, exploited, or just giving everyone high blood pressure? Well, the answer to that is the second half of Jesus's statement about salt: *if salt loses its taste, then it's no longer good for anything*. Now I don't actually know that salt can lose its taste, I think it stays salty for a really, really long time. But the point is that if we lose our taste, if we are no longer the seasoning, the preservative, the source of energy for blood and air, if we are not acting as salt *for others* in the world, then we are no longer good for much. It's the salty taste, the function; that is what's important about salt. Because salt, in and of itself, is not much of anything. It's rock, that's it, just NaCl, sodium chloride, another compound with not much function. But partner salt with something else and it can become a conduit, an energy, a base element of the giving of life to others.

Being the "salt of the earth" implies that we have some work to do, some function to perform, some responsibility in this kingdom of which Jesus speaks. Being the salt of the earth isn't about being something great and wonderful on our own; no, it's about being the ones who spice things up, who preserve the fish or the meat so that others can be fed, the ones who bring out the great and wonderful things of God's kingdom *not to suit our own tastes, but to preserve life for other people*.

And if Jesus has confused us a little with his salty reference, he reiterates his point with the follow up that while we are salt, and we are also light. Salty luminescence, as one pastor puts it⁵. We are light, and light, like salt, is pretty amazing, so long as it's illuminating something else. Light by itself can be pointless, even destructive. That's why Jesus says we are to let our light shine *before others*, not ourselves, so that those others may see our good works and give glory – not to us, but to God. We shine as the light of the world not for our own sake, but for the sake of others. We give light so that others may see the way of God. And of course in the end, it isn't really even our light that shines forth after all: it is the light of God.

So that's the thing: salt and light are only useful when they enhance something else. And we, as followers of Jesus, fulfill our roles as disciples when we flavor the earth and illuminate the world with our actions and words that ultimately point to Christ. As Christians, when we don't function for others, we can be corrosive. We can create

⁵ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037f9/salty_luminescence

fighting amongst ourselves. We can make everybody sick. But turn our salty orientation away from ourselves and to the good of others – and all of a sudden we become the fabric of life itself. Christians become the ones who preserve the best of what was, for the future of the world. We become the ones who remove the rust of neglect, who make traveling the difficult road safer, who beat the heart of humanity. Salt on its own is nothing. Salt because we just like the taste of it is sickening. But salt in connection, salt in community, salt in partnership is the foundation of all that is.

I mentioned that a few of us went to visit the RAWtools team in Buffalo yesterday. They were set up at an event at South Wedge Mission, which is an Episcopal and Lutheran partnership church mission that's been going for about ten years. And their mission, as far as I could understand it through their information and just being there, their mission is to be a comforting space for people who may not have grown up in a church, or may have had negative, corrosive experiences of church. They have Sunday worship but also have opened the church to different groups and programs. And I have enough experience with churches like to this to know that it's not all easy-going, but I did really like the two phrases they used to describe their mission: they are: a "safe haven for the religiously homeless" and a place that provides "meaningful work for the spiritually under-employed." Meaningful work for the spiritually under-employed. That statement sounds to me like a church that is testing out some new recipes, trying to get the spice level right for people whose taste buds are just slightly different, and finding new ways to enhance others – just as Christ would have us do as salt.

We are the salt of the earth and we are the light of the world. May we flavor the earth with the truth of the One who has fulfilled the law of God. May we light the way of the One of whom the prophets could only dream. May we commit ourselves to the One who calls us to the joyous responsibility of sharing the love of God with others as salt and light.⁶ May it be so. Amen.

⁶ [Ibid.](#)