

February 9 Be Salt

Matthew 5:13-20

Today's scripture comes from the Sermon on the Mount. In the Gospel of Matthew the writer brings together a cluster of statements by Jesus on what it means to live a righteous and holy life. In the Sermon on the Mount we find the Beatitudes, a collection of sayings on what it meant to follow the religious laws of the day, the Lord's Prayer, comments about fasting, pride, worry and judgment and this one today about salt and light. I am going to focus on just the first, "you are salt" since I talked about light just a few weeks ago.

Whenever I read this passage I am struck by the realization that Jesus is talking in the present tense. Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this...." Or, "before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you...." Rather, he says both simply and directly, "You are the salt of the earth. Now whenever Jesus gives a blessing, such as this, there are also requirements and expectations. This time he says that if we are to be useful salt, salt that people will value, the salt must remain salty.

We are a bit confused by this. After all, what does it mean for salt to remain salty? The form of table salt we know in North America, a chemically synthesized and purified form of sodium chloride, cannot but be salty. It is salt! In fact, you look at most boxes of salt and it will even give you its purity percentage!

But that was not how salt was experienced in the time of Jesus or for that matter in many places in the world today. Salt was a mixture of a variety of compounds and came from three sources in Palestine. The most pure came from salt mines, the closest being in modern day Iran, but it was very expensive to import. Next was that which came from evaporative methods, in this region sea water and water from the Dead Sea. It too was relatively pure but labor intensive. Finally around the Dead Sea the water had continually, over the eons, evaporated leaving salt deposits. This was relatively plentiful and inexpensive but also contained a lot of impurities. Even with the most pure they often added fillers to reduce the cost to make it more available to the general population. Salt was always a blend and the more salts in those compounds the more

valuable it was because the saltier it tasted. The reverse was true. The more fillers the less salty it tasted and the less valuable it was.

Now we can begin to understand the blessing of Jesus where he says, “You are salt” and it’s accompanying challenge to remain salty. It is saying to us to not dilute what God’s kingdom is doing with “fillers” from the kingdoms of this world. Or we might say, “Be real. Be authentic” —authentic to the one whose kingdom makes us salty!

What does that mean in practical terms? To answer that, we have to think about some of the things for which people used salt in Jesus time. Salt was used for seasoning, preservation, and purifying. To eat salt with someone signified a bond of friendship and loyalty and if you were making a covenant or contract you sprinkled salt as a way of sealing the deal. In rabbinic metaphorical language, salt connoted wisdom.

Let’s see how some of those ideas help us to be salty? We understand seasoning, but purifying? Salt was burned on the altars with the sacrifice as an act of purification. If we are to be a purifying force in our world it means living as a member of God’s kingdom instead of the worlds. This means that the oppressed are set free. Yokes are broken. People share their bread with the hungry and their clothes with those lacking them. The kingdoms of this world encourage obtaining, storing up and keeping all of these things for oneself as a sign of importance and blessing. But in God’s kingdom, it’s in the sharing of them all, that we are being salt. The more we focus on self instead of serving, the more diluted our actions become.

When we think of the idea of salt as a bond of our word and our friendship, to be salt means to be truthful in our actions and our words and to see each person as a person of worth. As I was working on this sermon I read the following Upper Room devotion:

Our young-adult Bible study group sat outside a sandwich shop in downtown Washington, D.C. We were beginning our discussion of the letter of James when a man approached our table. “Excuse me,” he said; “Are you studying the Bible?” One of us hesitantly answered, “Yes.” “May I join you?” he responded. We glanced at each other. How could we say no? The man sat down and asked if we would read the passage again.

We did, and it was stunning. James indicts his audience for showing favoritism to the rich while neglecting the poor. Ray, the man who had joined us, listened intently as we read. Then he told us about being homeless and going into churches and being ignored or even asked to leave because he wasn't well-dressed or well-groomed. "The worst part of being homeless," he said, "is having nowhere to hear the word." He meant the "word of God"; but he could also have meant any word at all. Too often, people who are homeless are ignored; no one speaks to them. After studying the Bible and sharing a meal, we asked Ray if we could pray for him; but he prayed for us. Christ visited us that night. How many other nights have we received a visit from Christ and not realized it?

This is an example of sharing salt, of living our convictions and finding we are blessed. I am sure each of us can think of times where we have done this, and just as easily remember times where we have failed to live our commitment to be salt.

The last image, one that I am sure was much in Jesus mind, is the relationship between salt and wisdom. Rabbis were always talking about how people should be wise, be salt, in their conversations and dealings with others. When you read other teachings of Jesus it is clear that it is not a "holier than thou" attitude like that often shown by the Pharisees. It isn't about making a great show of your faith just to get the applause of others. To be wise in Jesus mind is to be willing to listen, to share, and to be true to your convictions.

Salt: flavoring, purifying, bonding and enhancing our world, that is what we are to do. So how do we live up to our job of being salt?

In closing let me share one story of a person being the salt of the earth. Vivian had been a member of that congregation for over 60 years. For the past 10 years she and her husband had lived right across the street. Vivian was at the church almost daily doing little tasks, like cleaning up the kitchen on a Monday after coffee hour, or folding bulletins. She was always over early on a Sunday to greet people, particularly visitors and when there was a meeting she was attending you never worried about it. You knew she would be there early to turn on the heat, make the coffee and get the place ready. But what I remember most was a time when I was teaching a confirmation class. I

asked her to come and share a bit about the history of the church since she had been a member longer than anyone else. I expected her to share the history, which she did for a bit, but then she talked about what the church meant to her. How she had come to faith as a little girl, how it had enriched her life and why she so loved it now and wanted all to know what an awesome thing it is to love and be loved by God and a church. The kids listened with rapt attention. After she left one girl turned to me and said, "I now understand what it means to be a member of a church and why it is important. Up to now I had come to these classes because mom made me. I didn't plan to join. Now I want to be a member." You could tell from the way she said it that she was thinking, sometime fifty or sixty years from now I want to be able to say, "I belonged to a church and it supported me all through my life." Vivian was salt in many ways and that day I saw the transformative power of that life.

So you are salt. It is a blessing and a challenge. May we receive both.