

Below the Salt

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 5: 13-20

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“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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.



Below the salt. The first I ever heard that phrase was when I was a teenager. My dad was a voracious reader and he especially liked historical fiction – *Below the Salt* is the title of a 1957 novel by Thomas B. Costain set in Medieval England. Dad was reading it one summer while we were camping at the Shore and I recall him telling me that it is a Medieval phrase that had to do with where your place was in society established where you sat at the dinner table.

We take our salt for granted – mostly granulated, iodized salt for us – the salt shaker on our tables, salted butter, salted pork, salted popcorn. But also salt water that we swim in or salt that has medical use, or salt to melt the snow (that’s what’s below the salt, pavement!). It seems like whenever we want it we have access to

salt. But for most of history salt was one of the most precious of commodities.

Salt was included by the ancient Egyptians as an offering in tombs at the funerals of respected people. Salt was one of the key elements in the development of civilization around the world. Salt was used by conquering armies who would spread it on conquered cities to symbolize a curse on its re-habitation – “salting the earth.”

Salt became so valuable because it was highly desired as a seasoning or for curing foods or for healing properties but also valuable because it was so difficult to obtain. Salt was first developed for people’s use simply by evaporating the water from saltwater or by collecting it from the edges of salt seas. Later, as mining for salt became more common salt roads developed throughout Europe and North Africa and Asia – trade routes for getting salt from the mines to the markets where it could be sold.

It’s been said that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid with salt; but it’s also true that word “salary” comes from money that Roman soldiers were given so they could buy salt. The Roman Empire controlled the price of salt, increasing it to raise money for wars, or lowering it to be sure that the poorest citizens could easily afford this important part of their diet. Caravans consisting of as many as forty thousand camels traversed four hundred miles of the Sahara bearing salt to inland markets, sometimes trading salt for slaves: Timbuktu was a huge salt and slave market. Eventually cities grew based on their access to salt – Liverpool rose from just a small English port to become the prime exporting location for the salt dug in the great Cheshire salt mines and thus became the provider for much of the world’s salt in the 19th century.

In Middle Ages Europe, salt was so expensive that it could only be afforded by those in the higher ranks of society – royalty, the wealthy, maybe the merchant class – not the peasants, the servants, the serfs and laborers. The evaporation of saltwater process was more difficult in the colder climates of Northern Europe than it

was in warmer climates which had more direct sunlight. In the mid-1600s, natural rock-salt began to be mined commercially in Cheshire, England but its value remained high since that process was just as difficult. At meals, nobility and those in upper levels of society sat at the 'high table' and their commoner servants sat at lower trestle tables. Salt was placed in the centre of the high table. Only those of rank had access to it. Those poorer people were less favored and sat at the lower tables – below (or beneath) the salt.

Sixteen hundred years earlier, though, Jesus was talking about salt, using it as a metaphor for those who were hearing his message. “You are the salt of the earth” he taught. “You who are hear me, you who are changing your life because of my words, you who are taking on the powers of the world by confronting it with God’s truth – you are the salt of the earth.” Imagine that. Salt is such a precious commodity that Roman soldiers were being paid with it or were at least being paid enough that they could afford their dietary salt. If you were “not worth your salt” you didn’t survive in the Roman world. Yet Jesus is telling his audience – the poorest of the poor, peasants in The Galilee – those kicked aside by the rest of the world that they knew – that they were the salt. The Romans occupied their homeland, the religious elite in Jerusalem would have nothing to do with them, the sick and the untouchables, the women and children, the outcast and unclean. These are the people gathered at the feet of Jesus to hear his message.

We’re still at the scene we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel. And even though it’s probably not an historically accurate scene, it’s most probably an accurate collection of some of the most common teachings and sayings of Jesus. Last week we heard Jesus telling us how blessed each of us is – those in his first audiences and even us today – we are all blessed by God even if we might not feel so worthy.

“You are” ... you who the world despises, you who the world looks down on, you who are poor and outcast – “You are the salt of the earth.” You can be compared to the most valuable of

commodities. You are valuable. That’s a pretty powerful message if you’ve never had anyone treat you like that before. You are not “below the salt” in God’s perspective – you *are* the salt. It’s people who claimed to be more powerful than God – the rich and nobility and those with political power who claimed that they were above the salt – better than the poor who God also created.

You are the salt. You without money or land, without power and control, you who have no say in how you live and have no chance of moving up in social class. You are like the most desired of all the elements of the earth – you are like that seasoning which we all need in our diet, which we can’t live without. “Even though I struggle to buy salt for my household,” one might be thinking, “I am still more valuable than that in God’s eyes.”

But do you know what I never understood about this lesson from Jesus? How does salt lose its saltiness? “[I]f 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.”

If you mix salt with water, it doesn’t lose its saltiness – it makes the water salty. If you put salt on food it doesn’t lose its saltiness – it makes the food salty. If you crush salt into a powder, it’s still salty. If you mix salt with another mineral, it doesn’t take away its saltiness, does it?

Inquiring minds want to know ... so I Googled it!

The chemical composition of table salt is NaCl – sodium chloride. “When NaCl is combined with water, it is a mixture, not another compound,” writes Deneen White, whose scientific curiosity was piqued with this same question,

No discernible chemical reaction occurs. The salt particles enjoy the extra space of not being in crystal form, but the vast majority of the salt molecules don’t mingle with the water – ie share electrons. The only way for salt to lose its

saltiness, from a chemical perspective, is for a chemical reaction to occur. NaCl is a very stable substance. The chemical bond is very tight. You see, sodium and chlorine are happy to become one and share their one electron. Things work out really well for them...they are like the happily married couple that just loves to be married, not matter what hits the fan... So, for salt to lost is pungent saltiness, or change its physical composition, it would have to be diluted in water because it is non-reactive in its crystalline form. Or electricity would have to be introduce to force the sodium chloride into its ionic components thereby changing its chemical composition.

Now, I know I don't understand what that all means, but I'm still not sure that even after all that – mixing with water or shocking it with electricity would take away its saltiness. Salt in water is still salt.

Here's what's going on, writes biblical scholar Bruce Malina – and this makes sense to me. It's another of those moments in the Jesus message that we get lost in the translation.

The "earth" [refers to] an outdoor earthen oven (see also Job 28:5 and Psalm 12:6) found near the home. ... The earthen oven used dung as fuel. The dung heap was salted, and salt plates were used as a catalyst to make the dung burn. Salt loses its saltiness when the exhausted plates no longer serve to facilitate burning.

So another interpretation of “you are the salt of the earth” is “you are the catalyst to get things cooking ...” Without the salt plates, the earthen oven stays cold and is useless. With the salt, its cooking.

You are the catalyst. You who the world ignores. You who the world judges and despises. You who the world keeps down and the rulers of empires oppress. You who God blesses even though

the world refuses to bless you. You are who has the potential to make this world what God would have it be.

That's an amazing statement. And it's said to ... guess who? ... you ...

“Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.” It's been attributed, perhaps misattributed, to St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th Century. I think it's something of the same point. With us as the catalyst in the world God's will becomes the defining foundation for how the world operates. When we work for what God calls us to work for, the world becomes different than what it otherwise might be.

“Shout out,” preaches Isaiah of God's word to us, “do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! ... Is not this the fast that I choose [says God]: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

That's what we are to be if we will be God's catalyst in this world. Loosing the bonds of injustice that hold each of us from achieving what God wants of us. Working to bring freedom to anyone – everyone – who is oppressed. To share bread with the hungry and your house with the homeless, to give your clothes to the naked. And to not hide yourself from your own kin – we are all related to one another yet we hide from each other.

When we are that catalyst – or when we are that light on the lampstand, Jesus' next metaphor in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount – we are what God wants us to be. We are salt and light in this world.

God through Isaiah said it like this: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;

...Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

That’s our mission. That’s our call. That’s what we are to do as God’s salt in this world. We are not below the salt ... we *are* the salt! Where is the salt in our life here at Hope?

In worship. Week after week for over two centuries now this congregation and its forebears – St. George’s, Ebenezer, Trinity, Bethesda, Covenant – each week this community has gathered Sunday after Sunday and moments in between to worship God as a faith family. That’s a remarkable way for us to continue being the salt that strengthens this world. We gather our music, our prayers, our words, our praise, our love and we celebrate it with God in our presence.

You are the salt of the earth ...

Outreach. How many outreach projects is this church involved in? Adopt-a-Soldier – 7 more boxes went in the mail just last week. Flip-top Rings – to support Ronald McDonald House. Our 3rd Sunday Food Collection for the local food cupboard, Heifer Project International, Connect by Night to house homeless individuals, Breakfast Bags, Operation Christmas Child, Christmas Toy Box. And the many benevolences we have supported over the years with our annual budget – Habitat for Humanity, Frankford Group Ministry, Methodist Home for Children, Contact Crisis Center, Camp Innabah, on and on.

In Mission. Just this winter we’re supporting people from this congregation in their mission outreach in Jamaica and Haiti – reaching beyond our doors as salt to this world.

With food. I thought of it as some of visited Philadelphia’s Sunday Breakfast Mission just before Christmas – how important food is to who we are as God’s salt. Joanne and I are talking about an

ongoing relationship with the Mission or maybe making meals at Ronald McDonald House. One Tuesday a month we make Casseroles for St, John’s Hospice. During the year we nurture and nourish and support each other around so many tables – Soup & Sandwich Sunday which is coming up soon, a Spaghetti Dinner, a Chili Cook-off, Narthex Nosh. Whenever we gather at table we share in God’s love for us.

At this table as we celebrate communion this morning.

You are the salt ... we are God’s catalyst in this world. Let us remember that and let us be that.

Amen.