

Psalm 112: 1-7  
Isaiah 58: 6-12  
Matthew 5: 13-16

How to be Salt  
February 9, 2014  
Mary R. Brownlow

Have you ever made bread, and left out the salt? It's hard to put it back in, once it's baked. You can try putting salty things on a slice of the bread, but... It's not that it isn't nourishing: it's just plain boring. Have you ever made soup, and put in too much salt? It's hard to take it back out, once it's dissolved. You can dilute it, or try building up other flavors to disguise it. But the salt is there, and it's going to make you really thirsty.

Those are my first thoughts about salt, brought on by reading today's Gospel passage. But my use of salt in a modern kitchen does not begin to unpack the meaning of Jesus' words: "You are the salt of the earth." I could walk over to Dan & Whit's today and buy a pound of salt for less than a dollar. And, I could buy rock salt for my driveway, and sea salt, and Himalayan salt, and smoked salt. In the first century, salt was what we might call a necessary luxury. Or, a sacred necessity. It was used in cooking, but also as a preservative, as a part of ritual sacrifices, and a medicine. Newborn children were rubbed with salt (I suppose as an antiseptic) and covenants were sealed with salt. At the same time, it was not something you could run down to the store and buy: it was more precious than that.

As with many of Jesus' metaphors, we have adopted a phrase and shaped it for our own purposes. In modern times, we might say, "So-and-so is the salt of the earth" and we mean "So-and-so is a decent, dependable, unpretentious person. They work hard and have old-fashioned values." It's a nice phrase, but it really does not have much to do with Jesus' sermon on the mountainside, 2000 years ago.

So, to try to get a better sense of how we might use those words today, I am going back only 500 years, to Martin Luther. He preached a sermon on this passage back in 1532. Here is an outline of his sermon:

The purpose of salt is to preserve.

The purpose of salt is to bite.

The purpose of salt is to add pleasure and tastiness to life.

This is one of those nice 3-point outlines that essay-writers love: a nice simple structure. Let's see how far it takes us.

If the purpose of salt is to preserve, how are we the salt of the earth? What is it that we are preserving? Well, you might say that we are preserving a tradition: centuries of sacred writings and music and ethical teachings. Every Sunday, we can come here and get a dose of that kind of saltiness, and we offer the same to our children, so that they have some sense of history and belonging. We are here to preserve the past, in other words. Now, I love learning about the past, I love history, but I certainly cannot believe that this is what Jesus had in mind: some kind of museum of religious and spiritual practice.

But Jesus did not say, “You are the salt of your religious traditions.” He called his disciples the salt of the **earth**. Any preservative actions we have are to be used in caring for, preserving, the world outside these walls. We are directed outward. Yes, we will be inspired and enriched by our traditions, comforted by our sacred words. But the actions of preservation – if you like, of fighting bacteria and preventing decay – these take place in other settings, with other vocabularies, and other recipients. Decades ago, Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said: “The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” The church exists for those who aren't in the church. I hope that this is and will be true for us.

If the purpose of salt is to bite, how are we the salt of the earth? What is it that we are biting, and why? Once again, we could think of this as an internal process: calling each other to account, saying provocative and critical things to one another. I have heard it said that “vibrant faith demands critical vigilance, especially from its own insiders.” In other words, a prophetic sort of vigilance, much as the prophet Isaiah called his people to a higher standard. But, Jesus did not say, you are the salt of your own private community. Whatever “biting” we have to offer, whatever sharp insights we have to proclaim are for the good of the earth. We might proclaim, for example, that there is something wrong with a society that allows so many children to suffer from poverty, here in the beautiful state of Vermont, today. In 2007, the child poverty rate in our state was 12.4 percent. According to Census data from 2012, more than 15 percent of children in Vermont lived below the federal poverty line, which amounts to less than \$24,000 in household income for a family of four. This percentage did not go down in 2013. Some of our saltiness might take the form of reciting statistics, but I am sure that Jesus had something more active in mind.

If the purpose of salt is to add pleasure and zest to life, how are we the salt of the world? How do we display this particular function? We could say that we do this through joyful music, and delicious potlucks, and sincere friendliness to visitors. And all of those things happen and bring a lot of pleasure. But, imagine this: what of the purpose of our community life together was to be that small amount of salt that brings out the color and flavor and zest of life in God's good creation? This means enriching the good that is already present, this means promoting the healing that is already underway, this means throwing into high relief the gray, tasteless, hard patterns that constrict human living. It is a kind of illumination: showing the good to be celebrated, showing the limits to be broken down.

So, according to Jesus, as heard today, we are the salt of the earth, we are the light of the world. Remember that neither salt nor light are supposed to be an end in them selves. If, in a meal, all you taste is the salt, that is not a great meal. And the purpose of a lamp is not usually to be the focus of attention, but to make other things visible. Salt and light benefit other things. The followers of Jesus are told to bring out the full flavors of life as created by a loving God. In that work, we are both invisible and essential.

An Australian writer named Denham Grierson said that the three biblical images of salt, light and yeast offer “a theological foundation for a local congregation as it seeks to define its mission... That mission is best understood as a continuing persisting presence.” And so I look for examples of that continuing persisting presence as expressed here, in this local gathering of God's people. When are we salt and light?

When a group of 20 people takes part in a centering prayer circle in the parish hall, and invites anyone to join, we live out the core of prayer at the heart of the church. We preserve a sense of the holy on a Tuesday evening, right in the middle of afterschool programs and music lessons.

When pairs of members go to visit someone who cannot leave a skilled nursing facility, and bring flowers and cards and love, we live out a calling of caring. We preserve a tender connection with aging and faithful neighbors.

When a group of people travel to the Dominican Republic, bringing children's clothing, medical expertise, willing hands, and hope, we live out the blessings that Jesus offered to the poor and oppressed. We receive the delicious zest of love that transcends culture and language.

When a group of people hold a candlelight vigil on the Norwich Green on a freezing night, mourning the loss of precious children to senseless gun violence, we live out the call to be a biting and compassionate voice for change.

In our church covenant, we say "we will consecrate our time, talent, substance and influence." Think of salt as the "influence" part of that promise. Think of adding the zest of influence to the life of the whole world. Each of us makes that covenant promise in worship, each of us has a role in shedding light where we can.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "The great mystery of ministry is that while we ourselves are overwhelmed by our own weaknesses and limitations, we can still be so transparent that the Spirit of God, the divine counselor, can shine through us and bring light to others." I love Henri Nouwen's mysteries. We are not our weaknesses and limitations, we are not our statistics. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. So let's be salty. Let's be full of light.