

Are We Worth Our Salt?

A Sermon for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

by The Rev. Craig Lemming, *Transitional Deacon*

Sunday, February 5, 2016

Propers for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 58:1-9a

Psalm: Psalm 112:1-9

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer of Life. Amen.

In school I was terrible at Chemistry. Truly, I was rubbish at Chemistry. The struggle was so real, that even today, anything related to Chemistry usually makes me shy away. But the Chemistry behind salt is fabulous! Listen to the author Bill

Bryson's description:

Sodium Chloride is strange stuff because it is made up of two extremely aggressive elements: sodium and chlorine. Sodium and chlorine are the Hell's Angels of the mineral kingdom. Drop a lump of pure sodium into a bucket of water and it will explode with enough force to kill. Chlorine is even more deadly. It was the active ingredient in the poison gases of the First World War and, as swimmers know, even in very dilute form it makes the eyes sting. Yet put these two volatile elements together and what you get is innocuous sodium chloride – common table salt.¹

Bryson's writing on salt is fascinating. I learned that a small amount of salt is vital to sustaining daily life and without it we would die; and that salt was the cause of global expeditions, wars, and even slavery because its preservative powers made it an absolute necessity of life. Salt is mystical. As sweat and tears run down our

cheeks and settle upon our lips, we know that salt is the flavor of struggle, the flavor of joy, and the flavor of grief. Salt is the flavor of life and love. The taste of our tears; our uniquely human symbols of compassion² are salty.

In this morning's Gospel Jesus says, **"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."**³ Luke's version of Jesus' teaching is even more brazen: **"Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"**⁴ Jesus' words invite us to ask ourselves: "Are we worth our salt?"

I was fortunate enough to hear the keynote speaker from the Episcopal Church Foundation, Miguel Escobar, at a presentation to the Episcopal Church in Minnesota yesterday, where the assembly was invited to ponder the smallness of grains of salt, and the smallness and vulnerability of a tiny flame of fire light in a dark room. Why did Jesus chose these specific images as the metaphors of our identity? We all know that a pinch of salt brings out delicious flavors in our food. Too much salt not only spoils the taste of our food, it is also detrimental to our health. Yet that tiny pinch of salt in my oatmeal porridge brings out those lovely

flavors of maple syrup, dried fruit, walnuts, cinnamon, and that dash of heavy cream that I enjoy so much. Without that little pinch of salt, the flavors of my morning porridge are not nearly as scrumptious.

Studying one of the translations of today's Gospel text I discovered that we are called **"to be the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth"** (*The Message*). This translation also reminded me of one my favorite lines in literature. In his magical novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie writes:

Things – even people – have a way of leaking into each other... like flavors when you cook.⁵

I think we sometimes forget how our presence, our words, and our actions flavor our lives and the lives of those around us. At a time when almost every day we are bombarded by aggressive and mean-spirited words – like that lump of pure sodium dropped into a bucket of water that explodes with enough force to kill – when we encounter *those* aggressive words, we must remember that we are the salt of the earth. When the toxicity of "alternative facts"⁶ spew out of the mouths of elected officials like the deadly chlorine gas from the First World War – we must remember that we are the salt of the earth. With a pinch of our salt, we can bring out the God-flavors in each other. Instead of reacting like a volatile lump of

sodium or poisonous chlorine, let us respond with that small pinch of salt that can bring God-flavors out of tasteless conversations.

Those few grains of salt and that tiny, vulnerable flame of fire light in you and in me, can transform the world. When we have the courage to add our tiny pinch salt or to let our “little light shine,” we suddenly live into the vision proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah this morning.⁷ Suddenly we begin to taste and see the God-flavors and the God-colors of Isaiah’s prophetic vision. Our salt and our light can loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke; our small pinch of salt and our tiny flame of fire light reminds those we encounter that we are called to share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our houses; and when we see the naked, we cover them, and we do not hide ourselves from our own kin. Isaiah’s words confirm that the time has come for our salt and our light to break forth like the dawn, so that God’s healing shall spring up quickly. Black and brown voices continue to cry out for mercy; immigrant voices, women’s voices, and queer voices continue to cry out for mercy; the poor and the forgotten continue to cry out for mercy; and if we are worth our salt, we know that when these children of God cry out for mercy, we, the Body of Christ will answer; and

when the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant cry for help, we, the Body of Christ, will say, Here I am!

The Apostle Paul writes to the Colossians, **“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.”**⁸ I invite you to season your words with grace, salt, and light. Do not react like volatile sodium or poisonous chlorine; instead be who you are: be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In those seemingly insignificant moments; those moments where you witness a microaggression that hurts a fellow creature of God, be salty. When a passing comment smacks of racism, sexism, or xenophobia, let your vulnerable, little light shine. When a brown person, a woman, a queer person, an immigrant, a differently abled person, a poor person, a non-Christian person is being dehumanized, be salty; be the light of Christ in that dark place. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,” so that the flavor of Christ’s unconditional love for all people can continue to transform the tastelessness around us. And finally, in the words of the priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“Let Him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east.”⁹

Amen.

¹ Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (London: Doubleday, 2010), 184.

² Ad Vingerhoets, *Why Only Humans Weep: Unravelling the Mysteries of Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ Matthew 5:13.

⁴ Luke 14:34-35.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children: A Novel*, 25th ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 37.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts

⁷ Isaiah 58:6-9.

⁸ Colossians 4:6.

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," in *Gerard Manly Hopkins Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 24.