

Sermon for Sunday Feb 5, 2023
Matthew 5:13-20

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the wonderings of our minds reveal your wisdom in our time God of life and light. Amen

I absolutely love my dad - there are many reasons why. One of them is, he's easily impressed. His favorite dessert is sour cream pie. So, it is whenever I need to accumulate some "good daughter points" - I will make for my dad a sour cream pie. Sour cream pies are rather easy to make, you need a half decent pie crust, some juicy raisins and a tub of sour cream and a few other ingredients.

On one particular occasion, when I was in need of some serious "good daughter points" I proceeded to make my dad his favorite pie but I made a terrible mistake - instead of grabbing the sugar container and adding four tablespoons of sugar to the pie mixture - I grabbed the salt container. Now the pie -looked OK - it cut like a usual sour cream pie.

My Dad took a big first bit and smiled and with some hesitance went in for fork full number two. He smiled and complemented me about how it was a bit different then before, but it was good. By this time, I had taken a bite - it was absolutely awful. Did I mentioned how much I love my dad - he's my biggest cheerleader and even when I get something horribly wrong, I still get an A for effort.

In our reading today, from the book of Matthew, Jesus says "you are the salt of the earth.

Living as most of us do in cultures of plenty, we take household goods like salt for granted. But, until fairly recent in human history, salt was one of the most sought after commodities. The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits. Religious Covenants were often sealed with salt.

Salt was used for medicinal purposes, to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, stimulate thirst, and treat skin diseases. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt - hence our English word "salary". Brides and grooms rubbed salt on their bodies to enhance fertility. Around 10,000 years ago, dogs were first domesticated using salt; people would leave salt outside their homes to entice the animals. And of course, in all the centuries before refrigeration, salt was essential for food preservation.

We still use salt for all sorts of purposes. Salt heightens flavors, melts ice, softens water, and hurries a boil. It soothes sore throats, rinses sinus, eases swelling, and cleanses wounds. How many of us remember encouraging our kids, who had their "wisdom teeth" removed to rinse with a salt water rinse? On the flip side salt also has an edge. It stings, burns, scratches, and irritates. If we don't have enough salt in our bodies, we die. But if we have too much? We die.

I know that it is possible to take a metaphor too far. No single description in the Bible - salt, light, bride, clay, sheep, branch, dove, soil-captures or contains the entirety of what it means to live as followers of Christ. But when Jesus calls his listeners -the salt of the earth- he is saying something profound, something easy to miss in our 21st century context.

First of all, he is telling us **who** we are. **We are salt**. We are not *supposed to be* salt or, *encouraged to become* salt, or promised that *if we become* salt, God will love us more. The language Jesus uses is 100% descriptive; it's a statement of our identity. We are the salt of the earth. We are that which enhances or embitters, soothes or irritates, melts or stings, preserves or ruins. For better or worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters. It matters a lot. Whether we want to

or not, whether we notice or not, whether we're intentional about it or not, we impact the world we live in.

Second, we are **precious**. Again, it's easy to miss the importance of this in our modern world where salt is cheap and plentiful but imagine what Jesus first followers hear when he calls them salt. Remember who they are. The poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted. The hungry, the sick, and the frightened. "You," he tells them all "you are the salt of the earth." You who are not shiny and well fed and fashionable, you who have been rejected, wounded, unloved, and forgotten – you who are ordinary ones - you are essential. You are worthwhile. You are treasured. And I am ***commissioning you.***

For all of us who have spent months or years trying to earn Divine favor, believing that our "goodness" alone makes us precious in God's eyes, I hope this metaphor stops us in our tracks. Jesus knowingly names a commodity that is priceless in his time and place. He confers great value on those who do not consider themselves valuable.

Third, salt does its best work when it is poured out. When it is scattered. When it dissolves into what is around it. Salt makes the steak savoury and the caramel sauce sing. It's meant to share its unique flavor in order to bring out the best in all that surrounds it. Which means that if we want to enliven, enhance, and deepen, the world we live in, we must not hide within the walls of our churches or homes. We must not cluster and congregate for our own comfort. We must not retreat into our theological bubbles. Salt doesn't exist to preserve itself; It exists to preserve what is not itself.

Lastly, salt is meant to enhance, not dominate. Christian saltiness heals - it doesn't wound. It refines; it doesn't shrink. It softens; it doesn't destroy.

One of the great tragedies of historic Christianity has been its failure to understand this distinction. Salt fails when it dominates. Instead of eliciting goodness, it destroys the rich potential all around it. Salt poured out without discretion leaves a burnt, bitter sensation in its wake. It ruins what it tries to enhance. It repels.

This, unfortunately, is the reputation Christianity has these days. We are known as the salt that worsens wounds. We are considered arrogant, domineering, and uninterested in enhancing anything but ourselves. We are known for hoarding our power, not for giving it away. We are known for shaming, not blessing. We are known for using our words to burn. Not heal.

This is not what Jesus intends when he calls us the salt of the earth. Our preciousness is not meant to make us proud; it's meant to humble us and call us to service.

Our vocation in these times and places is not to lose our saltiness. That's the temptation - to retreat. To choose blandness over boldness and keep our love for Jesus a secret.

We are called rather to live wisely, creatively, and in balance. **Salt at its best - sustains and enriches life.** It pours itself out with discretion so that God's Kingdom might be known on the earth- a Kingdom of spice and zest, a Kingdom of health and wholeness, a Kingdom of varied depth, flavor, and complexity.

To be salt, to be followers of Jesus, is to take seriously what our identity signifies.

We are the salt of the earth.

That is what we are, for better or for worse.

May it be for better.

May your pouring out - and mine be for the life of a better world.

Amen