

Useful

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 112:1, 4-10

Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 5:13-16

I really don't miss it! So says the suddenly health conscious and excessively cheery friend who has foresworn salt from his diet. I'm never quite sure whether to take such remarks seriously or not. *I really don't miss it?* Is that a fact or is that a strategy born of the desperate effort to convince oneself that the sacrifice was worth it? Because I'll tell you this, when it comes to salt, I'd miss it. No doubt about it. I'd miss it enough to go on the black market for it, sneaking it past loved ones and family care physicians, binging on French fries at some remote McDonalds where no one would recognize me. I'd be the guy lying to his doctor and unfriending the neighborhood nutritionist. *Have you cut out the salt?* "Sure thing, Doc. I really don't miss it."

Let me put it this way — lima bean, no salt; lima bean, with salt? That's like asking, purgatory or nirvana, your choice? I don't care if you've thrown out your salt shaker, you still cannot eat a salad without running into it, the word salad, itself, is the Latin word for (*guess what*) salted.

Of course, if asked a preference for salty or sweet, I'd say, *Yes ... but could you put them in separate bowls, please?* Salt has certainly endured, refusing to give up its place on the spice rack to those arrogant, trendy newcomers like kala jeera and black garlic. Did you know that the earliest signs of salt processing date to 6000 BCE when Neolithic people in present day Romania boiled spring water to extract salt? Salt eventually became a significant factor in economic development and trade. Salzburg (lit. Salt Castle) in Austria became a wealthy city through the production of salt.

The demand for salt led to the evolution of trade routes across the Mediterranean and into Asia. Disputes over salt have not only played a factor in wars, such as the French and American Revolutions, but salt has even been weaponized in war. In the book of Judges, when Abimelech took the city of Shechem, he sowed the city with salt as a way of preventing the conquered from planting crops to sustain them, both physically and economically. In the 20th Century, Gandhi organized and led 100,000 protesters on what was called the Salt March, a twenty-four day nonviolent act of civil disobedience in opposition to the colonial salt tax and the British monopoly on salt.

Just think, all that fuss so I could enjoy a bag of *Fritos*. In truth, however, as much as I crave my sodium-rich family of O's (*Fritos, Nachos, Doritos, Tostitos, and Cheetos*), only a small percentage of salt is used in food. The vast majority of salt is used in agriculture, water treatment, chemical production, de-icing, and manufacturing. The single largest use of salt is as a feedstock for the production of chemicals like caustic soda and chlorine used in the manufacture of plastic, polyvinyl chloride, and paper pulp. It boggles the mind to consider how many times and for how many purposes in human history, someone has said, *Let's just add a little salt to it and see what happens.*

Ubiquitous is the word used when something is so prevalent that, no matter where you go, you cannot get away from it. Salt seems to qualify, doesn't it? Have a sore throat? Dissolve some salt in warm water and gargle it. Working at the aluminum plant? You'll be adding a layer of salt to the molten metal in order to extract the iron and impurities. Did you get a new ice cream churn for Christmas? Don't forget the rock salt before you start cranking. The one place you won't find salt, right now, is in Texas. The ice came, and the rock salt vanished from the shelves faster than toilet paper in

a pandemic. Let's hope they still have the kind for popcorn, because Texas could use some comfort food right about now.

Ubiquitous it may be, but one thing I hope you take away from today is that as often as salt shows up on the list of ingredients, salt does not exist for itself. Whether it's sea salt on a caramel, curing ham for your biscuit, melting the ice on your sidewalk, soothing a bee sting, or putting out a grease fire, salt's purpose, most generally, is to benefit its host, bringing out flavor, soothing tired feet, refining aluminum, producing plastic. You don't order a bowl of salt at a restaurant. You don't put salt in a safety deposit box with your valuables. You don't frame a bag of salt in a shadow box and call it art, unless some lost Andy Warhol piece shows up. Salt is ubiquitous because it is useful. Our lives are abetted by it and would be less without it.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth..." Perhaps this is the codicil to the Beatitudes we explored last week. In the Beatitudes (Latin for blessings), Jesus wanted us to understand that our value, our blessedness, is not dependent on the world's affirmation, but is assured in God's grace. "Blessed are you..." No matter how the world views you or treats you, your value, your blessedness is set, established in the economy of God's kingdom.

Understanding this, Jesus, here, points us to what we are to do with this blessedness. What is it that Rebecca has been trying to imprint on our hearts since before the pandemic? You are blessed **to be** a blessing. Listen, salt became a commodity, not because of its beauty or its inherent value, but because of its usefulness. We look to salt, not as a museum piece, but for the good it adds to something else. So, when Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth,” he is affirming our shared purpose to bring good to the world we inhabit.

I have a colleague who re-retired recently. It seems preachers have a habit of channeling Tom Brady in their exit strategy. After a thriving generation-to-generation ministry in a university town, Bob retired, but before unpacking his books, he accepted an interim position, pastoring for two years at a historic church in New York City. By the end of that period of service, he was admittedly tired, and yet, as he settles into his re-retirement, he welcomed the rest, but Bob still refuses to equate being settled with being stagnant. Just last week, he told a mutual friend that what he desires is not power, public affirmation, or something to salve an obsession with busy-ness, but that there still remains within him a desire to be useful.

To be useful. I heard that and immediately thought of our text. That's exactly what Jesus is saying here. "You are the salt of the earth." You are, by the grace of God, called and sent forth to be useful, not existing for yourself, but for the greater good, for the benefit of others, adding to the life of a family, a community, the environment, the neighbor, the world.

To be useful. What a beautiful way to think about the gift of life. Blessed to be a blessing. Oh, and that mutual friend? He also re-retired, just last week. And guess what? This week I saw a photo of him posted on Facebook. He was playing a game with children in a church fellowship hall, helping out with the mid-week program in the congregation up in Black Mountain he'll be attending in his re-retirement.

To be useful. Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, who endured the depths of human suffering and that most egregious witness to human sin, said, "Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all who need us desperately." It is important to note that the *You* Jesus refers to in our text is plural. "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus isn't just referring to our individual good deeds, but is also referring to our collective efforts and witness. It is incumbent upon Christ's church to regularly ask itself the

question, if South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church were to cease to exist tomorrow, who beside its members would miss it or experience it as a loss?

Amy Matthew's moment for mission is part of our effort to wrestle with that question. It's going to be cold tonight, and there are church members in faith communities all around Charlotte volunteering in a variety of ways to reduce the suffering among the homeless that comes with the cold. If we say our lives belong to Christ, then we are also saying that our lives belong to all who need us desperately.

Dorothy Day, the iconic Catholic social worker and activist was lauded, praised, and pilloried, her life witness, as is true with most public figures, the subject of ongoing debate, commended and critiqued from both the right and the left. What is not in doubt was her lifelong desire to be useful, particularly in the face of suffering. As a child, Day lived in Oakland at the time of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, and the experience stirred in Day "a theory of mercy based on her mother's nightly reassurances and the broader response of collectivity and charity. Why, she wondered, couldn't the community care for all its members so generously the rest of the time?" (Casey Cep, *The New Yorker*)

She would spend the rest of her life leaning into that tension, advocating for those who suffer, providing shelter for the unhoused, seeing the face of Christ in the marginalized, always deepening her sense of the connection between God and God's world. A *New Yorker* profile expressed the way her life was lived in concert with her message: "a kind of personalist experience whereby our hearts are changed not by airtight argument or moral perfection but by direct encounters with human needs and those who rise to meet them."

Day once observed, "People say, 'What is the sense of our small effort?' They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do."

To be useful, in your family system, in your church, in our shared witness, in our community and world. You are the salt of the earth. Jesus said it, so may we live it. Amen.