

2-8-26 Sermon: “Salted” – Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “You are the salt of the earth.”

I must admit, I understand the light metaphor a little better; it feels more natural. Jesus is telling us that we shine God’s light into places of darkness. That we illuminate what is true and right and good. That we, at our best, are the mirror that reflects God’s light into the world and reveals God’s goodness for what it is.

Salt is a little more puzzling to me. We...adorn the earth’s French fries? Increase the earth’s risk of chronic hypertension? Well, possibly, but I don’t think that’s what Jesus is going for.

So I did a little research this week into all the different things that salt can do – and which uses people knew about in Jesus’ first-century world (that rules out the hypertension hypothesis). What is Jesus trying to say to us through these metaphors about our lives and vocations as Christians?

The first use that comes to mind for most people is that salt adds flavor to a dish. Salt seasons things, but not quite in the same way that pepper or garlic or cumin does. Most spices add their own flavor to a dish, but salt *sharpens* and *enhances* the flavors that were already there. Salt takes what is subtle – perhaps even hidden – and brightens it, amplifies it, makes it clear and obvious.

In the ancient world, salt was considered precious because of its seasoning qualities, but also because of its usefulness as a preservative. When applied correctly – in brining or curing – salt keeps food from spoiling, keeps it safe, edible and nutritious.

So when Jesus tells us we are the salt of the earth, perhaps he is trying to activate our own preservative qualities. Maybe he’s telling us to find what is good – in the church in the world – and to hold onto it, preserve it, keep it fresh and relevant for future generations. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to discern what, in our faith and culture, we can hold loosely and let fall away, and what things we should cling to because they are essential.

As salt, maybe Jesus is asking us to season the earth – and not just with our own flavor. Perhaps we disciples have been sprinkled into creation to bring out the goodness that is already there. Like salt, we can seek to enhance and bring out what is best in this world – those places where God’s goodness shines and where Christ is already at work. We can find the corners where God’s love and justice are subtle – even hidden – and make them so real and present that the earth can *taste* God’s goodness.

Salt preserves and it seasons...but it also has an edge. Salt makes us thirsty. Salt melts ice – which is very good news in today’s world – and it speeds up rust and corrosion. Saltwater cleans a wound and helps it heal, but it sure does sting in the process. Salt is a powerful substance, but it doesn’t just preserve and enhance what it touches; sometimes salt confronts what is there and breaks it apart.

Perhaps this is also part of our calling to be the salt of the earth. Jesus warns us not to lose our flavor, our edge. To stay “salty,” to name hard truths, expose what is broken, call out evil when we see it. Perhaps being the light of the world is not just about dispelling gloom, but also about shining our light onto those things that powerful forces in our world would prefer stay hidden in darkness.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “You are the salt of the earth.”

And something both salt and light have in common is that it only takes a little bit of each to make a big difference.

This was good news for Matthew's small, fledgling, first-century Christian community. It remains good news for a twenty-first century American church rapidly declining in both size and influence. In order to effect God's change in the world – to preserve and bring out what is good and corrode and melt away what is evil – it only takes a little bit of salt, or of light. Did you know – one single candle on the horizon is visible from 1.6 miles away? And while a little bit of salt enhances a dish, we all know what too much salt can do. It overpowers and drowns out all the other flavors; it eventually renders food inedible.

Social and political scientists tell us that what is true about salt and light is also true about people and movements. They call it the 3.5% rule, a term coined by researchers Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, who shed light on this dynamic in a study they conducted in 2013 – an analysis of the effectiveness of violent versus nonviolent efforts to bring about political regime change.

When they surveyed these movements through history, they were surprised by what they found. It turns out that nonviolent movements of civil resistance are twice as likely to succeed as violent coups and civil wars when it comes to toppling authoritarian regimes. And what's more, it only takes a relatively small percentage of people actively engaging in civil resistance to unseat a dictator. In fact, Chenoweth and Stephan discovered, once 3.5% of the total population becomes actively engaged in the protests, success appears to be inevitable.¹

That's just a little salt, sprinkled into a simmering stew. Just a single candle burning in a window. But isn't that what Jesus teaches us? - that just a pinch of salt is enough to preserve and bring out what is good, to crack and melt the façade of evil. To stir up those echoes of God's kingdom already in our midst, on earth as it is in heaven.

And we are the salt of the earth.

It's interesting...the commodity of salt was a bit of a paradox in Jesus' time. Salt is one of the most plentiful natural resources on this earth, and yet it was also one of the most precious and valuable. Because it was so labor intensive to extract and so essential for the preservation of food, salt became *highly* valued commodity. Literal wars were fought over salt, and the word "salary" that we use today comes from the Latin *salarium*, which was an allowance paid to Roman soldiers so that they could buy salt.

So plentiful...and yet so precious. Friends, I think this might also be true for human goodness. That it is the most common thing on earth, and yet so incredibly precious because it is so necessary, and so difficult to extract from day-to-day life.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says. "You are the salt of the earth." And so Jesus has salted the world with us, hoping that we will be the ones who find and bring out the flavors of goodness. That we will be the ones who oxidize evil and melt away violence from the earth.

So, beloveds, be light. Be salt. Be what you were created to be. Amen.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>.