

“Salt Life”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 9, 2020

First Scripture Reading: James 1:22-27 (The Message)

²²⁻²⁴ Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

²⁵ But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

²⁶⁻²⁷ Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

¹³“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. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.



Sermon: “Salt Life”

Jesus tells his disciples and those who have gathered to hear him teach “You are the salt of the earth.” You’ve no doubt heard that phrase before. It’s a common idiom people use when referring to a certain category of people seen as hardworking, and humble.

In 1971, The Rolling Stones recorded a tune for their *Beggars Banquet* album entitled “Salt of the Earth.” It is a working-class anthem, written by Mick Jagger that captures a certain blue-collar ethos. The lyrics go like this:

*Let's drink to the hard-working people, let's drink to the lowly of birth;
Raise your glass to the good and the evil, let's drink to the salt of the earth.
Say a prayer for the common foot soldier, spare a thought for his back breaking work;
Say a prayer for his wife and his children, who burn the fires and who still till the earth.*¹

Merriam-Webster tells us that the “Salt of the Earth” is “a very good and honest person or group of people.”² ECEnglish.com, a website designed to help non-native speakers learn English as a second language explains the phrase as “a compliment...it means that you are a person of great worth and reliability.”³

But like a lot of things Jesus said, this one familiar phrase has undergone an evolution; it has been twisted and changed, not necessarily on purpose, and it has taken on a life of its own. The common consensus seems to be that the salt of the earth are the poor, hardworking, reliable people. And coming as it does right after Jesus says blessings upon the poor in spirit... the meek... those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... the pure in heart... and so on, it makes sense that “the salt of the earth” might refer to a praise-worthy, humble and blessed group of people.

But that would be wrong. Jesus is not describing a group. He is not setting up some kind of class superlative. He is telling his listeners what they are supposed to be. New Testament scholar Douglas Hare writes that the statement [that we are

salt of the earth] refers not to *status*, as if it said ‘You are the world’s ethical elite,’ but to *function*: ‘You must add zest to the life of the whole world.’”⁴ Tone matters here. Jesus isn’t praising the disciples saying “Hey, you guys are great! You’re real “salt of the earth” folks! No, he’s directing them saying “You are salt. Go be salty!” Being called “Salt of the earth” isn’t a reward or a pat on the back, it’s a reminder of who you are and what you’re supposed to be. And we are supposed to be salt. Not just for ourselves, but for the earth.

I get it. That’s a little weird. But think about what salt is. Salt is a rock. You literally dig it out of the ground. But without it, human life as we know it doesn’t exist. Salt is a compound of sodium and chlorine. The first is used by our bodies to transport nutrients and transmit nerve impulses, while the second is essential for digestion and respiration.⁵ You can use salt to melt ice, and to freeze ice cream. You can use it to preserve meat and pickle just about any vegetable. It is extremely versatile and beneficial in all facets of human existence. In his book *Salt: A World History*, Mark Kurlansky says that there are over 14,000 uses for salt.⁶ But you probably know it best as the magic ingredient that gives flavor to almost everything you eat. Popcorn, potato chips, French fries are all special gifts from God, but without salt, they really aren’t worth the effort.

One of the best examples I can think of for the difference salt can make in your food is Grits; the humble culinary mainstay of my homeland and my people. Grits are almost nothing without salt. I keep finding people who don’t like grits because, they say, they’re bland. And my response to those people is “Of course they are. Because you have to put salt in them!” Salt in your grits makes all the difference in the world. But that’s all you need to put in them. If you start putting other stuff in them, you’re doing it wrong. Butter and/or cheese are also acceptable, but only if they are preceded by salt.

Sugar, milk, cream, syrup, NO. Just No. These are grits, doggone it. Not cream of wheat. Not oatmeal. Grits. And they need salt. No salt, and you have paste. Add some salt and you have an amazing dish that goes well with almost everything, especially bacon and eggs; especially shrimp.

But here’s the thing about salt. NO ONE loves salt. But almost everyone loves things that are salted. It’s not the salt that’s special, it’s what salt does. Gold by itself has value. Silver, platinum, diamonds, have value even when they just sit there looking pretty. But salt, is only valuable for what it does. Take away its saltiness and all you have is a rock. But what happens if you reach for the saltshaker, and what comes out isn’t salty? That’s what Jesus is talking about here. You, me, we are all salt and we have a purpose.

That purpose is to share God’s love with the world; to do the things Jesus teaches, especially in Matthew 25: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned. It’s to do the things Paul says love is in 1st Corinthians 13: to be patient and kind, to rejoice in the truth, to be not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, but to hope and endure and be humble. We see what Jesus means by being salt of the earth when we hear James saying “Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”⁷

It is our purpose to facilitate abundant life; to enhance the flavor of the world; to make the world a better place. But if we don’t do that, what good are we? Yes, here the metaphor falls down a little bit because we are all children of God, worthy of love and compassion whether we actually do anything to earn those things or not. But we are created with a purpose and we are called to live into that purpose. And when we don’t live into that purpose, then we are like salt that has lost its saltiness. We are water that isn’t wet. We are like the proverbial rubber crutch, the glass hammer, the submarine with screen doors.

That is what Jesus is here telling his disciples. Loving and serving God by loving and serving God’s people is not just something we do for extra credit. Living the gospel and sharing the good news with the world is not just an amusing side-line. It is who we are. It is our stated purpose.

In a broken and hurting world where so much of life is colored by greed, and abuses of power, and hatefulness, and selfishness, Jesus speaks a healing message of peace and love that builds bridges and tears down walls. Jesus represents abundant life for all, not just for some. Jesus speaks love and compassion for all, even for our enemies and the people who hate us. Jesus speaks of reconciliation where people who were once foes can become friends, which is a very different message than the one the world so often gives. The world values power and money and stuff. The world values accolades and praise and success, however that is counted. And the world suggests that the most important person you can serve is yourself and if taking care of yourself hurts someone else, tough.

Yet here Jesus says we are salt; we are a critical necessity, not just for ourselves, but for the world. Think about that for a minute. It is the very nature of who we are; it is our very purpose not to fend only for ourselves, but to love and serve the world. To not just share Christ's message of grace, mercy, and steadfast love, but to live it. To be salt for the entire earth. And if we aren't salty. Then we're just rocks.

Jesus also says here that we are the light of the world. Now this might be a little confusing since John 8:12 says that Jesus is "the light of the world." How then can *we* be the light of the world? In the same way that the full moon is light in the night sky. Any grade school student can tell you that the moon, for as bright as it shines, is not itself a source of light. It reflects the light of the sun. In the same way we reflect God's light into all the world.

Like salt, light is critically important. We live in a world that always seems to be well lit. The sun shines during the day; electric lights illuminate our work. Streetlights and car head lights guide us home after dark, night lights and bedside lamps help us find our way to the bathroom at night. There is so much light in our modern world that when the power goes out, it can seem especially dark. You don't realize how much ambient light flows through open curtains or shines from the clock on your microwave until the power is cut and it is all taken away.

And light isn't just convenient. Light makes it possible for us to see at all. Our eyes are extremely sophisticated organs that collect and process light. Everything we see is just our eyes receiving and our brains interpreting the light that is reflected off things around us. Without light we can't see. Without light, we can't learn, we can't build, we can't find our way.

To say that "You are the light of the world" is a statement of who and what we are. Again, this is not a statement of our superlative status. This is not like calling Louis XIV "the Sun King." This is not Karen Carpenter singing "You light up my life." When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," he is speaking to our purpose and that purpose is to reflect God's light into all the world. We are to share God's love; to speak to God's grace; to be conduits of God's goodness, sharing the blessings of God with everyone, everywhere, all the time. And when we shy away from that purpose, it's like on an especially dark night, taking your light and hiding it under a box. No one can see. No one can find the way.

It would be wrong to ignore the personal aspect of discipleship. Yes, being a disciple is about my walk with Jesus but it's also about how that walk impacts the world. Being a disciple is about *my* salvation; it's about *my* personal spiritual growth; it's about *my* living each day trusting that what God wants for my life really is what's best. But being salt and light means my discipleship impacts more than just myself. Because it's also about how I help bring seasoning to the lives of others and light to the dark places. It's about the way I share God's love. It's about the way I advocate for equity and justice. It's about the way I try to make things better for the poor and the oppressed. It's about the way I speak up when lies are told and when injustice is done.

But I also understand that we live in a world where calling yourself a disciple can feel like you've uttered a dirty word. We live in a society with a rapidly growing segment of people who do not trust Christians, and with good reason. And it can be embarrassing to associate ourselves with people who live and express their faith in ways that make us uncomfortable. Sometimes it feels better to not define ourselves by our faith so that we don't get associated with some of our Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree. But our faith is defined by Christ, not other Christians and if there are people out there who distort what it means to be a disciple of Christ and who give the gospel a bad name, then we do no service to God's work in the world by keeping our own discipleship secret.

We are salt. We are light. That's who we are. That's what we do.

So, we need to study, and serve, and share, and act. We need to be courageous, and have faith, and trust God. Because we are salt in a world that needs us to be salty and we are light in a world with too many dark corners.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Salt of the Earth, Mick Jagger, The Rolling Stones, Album: Beggars Banquet. 1971

² "Definition of THE SALT OF THE EARTH." 7 Feb. 2020, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20salt%20of%20the%20earth.

³ "Why do we say 'Salt of the earth'? | Learn English." 6 Feb. 2020, www.ecenglish.com/learnenglish/lessons/why-do-we-say-salt-earth.

⁴ "Matthew." *Matthew*, by Douglas R. A. Hare, John Knox Press, 1993, p. 44. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching.

⁵ Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: A World History*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Pp. 5-6. Print.

⁶ Kurlansky, Pg. 5.

⁷ James 1:27, The Message