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Pass the Salt
A sermon on Matthew 5:13-20
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Today I am preaching on yet another lectionary passage that I've never preached on before. When I realized that I hadn't yet preached on today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, I couldn't believe it. Salt of the earth, light of the world, how did I manage to avoid that all these years? I've done children's moments on this, in my previous role as an associate pastor, but somehow was never the main preacher when this passage came up.

Let's first locate this passage. Jesus said these things as part of his famous "Sermon on the Mount," which he preached to his followers and the thousands of people who came from the surrounding villages to listen to what Jesus had to say. He has just finished proclaiming what we now call "The Beatitudes": Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth, etc. Today's passage continues Jesus' message. . .

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Wow—perhaps we better start there. This can be a confusing thing to hear, so let's tackle it. Sometimes people think that the laws of the Hebrew Bible, what we call "The Old Testament," don't matter like they used to. Since we have Jesus, we don't need all that. Jesus says, think again. Everything in there matters. But we always have to interpret those laws in light of the GREATEST commandment, which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

The scribes and the Pharisees were groups of people who were renowned for carefully observing the LETTER of the law, but not necessarily the SPIRIT or intent of the law.

Remember how Jesus got in trouble for healing someone on the sabbath, and for picking grain and eating it on the sabbath, as he and his disciples were walking along, because they were hungry, and Jesus explained, “The sabbath was made to be a blessing for people, not the other way around.” He wasn’t blowing off the commandment about the Sabbath, which after all is one of the TEN commandments; he was returning to the spirit of it. That makes Jesus’ words about our righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees sound totally different.

Back to the salt and the light. We already give a lot of attention to the image of light, because it is all over the Bible. Today, I’d like to focus on SALT. In fact, I’d like to change the title of today’s sermon to “Pass the Salt.” What does Jesus want us to hear when he tells us, “You are the salt of the earth”?

Yesterday I watched a video on the History Channel about salt. Here’s a fun fact: there are more than 14,000 known uses for salt. And also, if we didn’t have salt in our bodies, our blood pressure would plummet and our hearts would stop. Salt is so important that there have been times throughout history when salt was actually traded pound for pound for gold. In ancient times, salt meant POWER. Before refrigeration, salt was one of the few ways to preserve food. Without salt, armies couldn’t travel very far, and explorers couldn’t sail to new lands, because their food would spoil.

Another fun fact: you’ve probably heard the phrase, “He is worth his salt.” When we say that, we mean that the person is doing a good job and deserves their pay. This expression comes from the days when Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt, because again, salt was so valuable. The word “salary” comes from the Latin word “salarium,” which originally referred to a soldier’s allowance to buy salt.

When Jesus says to his followers that they are the salt of the earth, he is telling us: as the body of Christ in the world today, we have great worth. We play a vital role. We have life-giving power.

Now what does that look like, to be salt in the world today? Now, don't get too hung up on the properties of salt—I know a lot of us out there are trying to avoid eating too much salt—but there ARE some things we can take away from this amazing image that Jesus holds up in front of us. And remember, Jesus is saying, you ARE the salt of the earth—not, go out and get salty—but, as my followers, this is who you already ARE. Here we go, five things:

Since salt brings out the flavor of food, the first take-away is easy: **the church is meant to bring out the best in people.** One reason I will always love the Church is that so often, church has brought out the best in me. In church, people have taught me, forgiven me, taken me on trips that changed my life, sang with me, listened to me, laughed and cried with me, encouraged me, prayed for me, and believed in me. And they did it in the name of Christ. We are salt when we make it our way of life to look for the presence of Christ in one another, and reflect it back to one another.

The second one is a little harder. Salt preserves food. I think there's a couple ways to think about that. One might be that **the church preserves the things that nourish us.** For example, it's the church that makes time and space for worship, for glorifying and enjoying God, as the Westminster Catechism would say. In worship, we are not getting a bunch of things done—unless you're working on your smart phone right now—we're not trying to be productive, or burn calories, or check things off the list. We're just basking in the presence of God, remembering who and whose we are. And this feeds our souls.

But in addition to the spiritual things that nourish, I think there's also a message for us about actual food. The whole point of preserving food is so it can be eaten and shared. We can meet a basic human need by sharing food with each other. Every time we fill the blessing box, donate food to Doorstep, or make sure that someone off the street gets a hot cup of coffee and some donut holes, we are SALT. Yet we have the resources, the talent, and now the kitchen to do a significant food ministry if we want, if we really want to shake some salt and shine some light in our little corner of the world. Because **being the salt of the world sometimes involves actual salt.** That's take-away number two.

Take-away number three has to do with a different kind of salt. I'm thinking about the salt in our tears. One of the beatitudes which Jesus has just spoken is, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." I don't know about you, but there are days, weeks, months, and even years where I cling for dear life to that one. Times when I have wondered, will I EVER stop hurting? My life's pretty good, and I still have those feelings sometimes.

I'm so proud of the good listening that I know is happening in this congregation, and the way we make it safe for people to grieve and cry and have their feelings. If we can't cry in church, if we can't cry with the people who are supposed to be our brothers and sisters in Christ, then where? And it doesn't cost anything to sit with someone as they grieve, to be quiet and listen, without judgment, and even to cry with them. We have a salty bunch of Stephen Ministers who are trained in how to provide a very special confidential, compassionate ministry of listening, and those folks know how to handle tears, but we don't all have to be trained Stephen Ministers to be a church where the salt of human tears is honored.

Making room for the salt of tears means the courage to feel our own grief at the injustice and suffering in the world. At the increasing numbers of homeless children in our schools, the

grim statistics on children growing up in foster care, the outrage of human trafficking, overcrowded refugee camps, so much misery we can hardly take it in, so we don't. It's too easy to turn away, to tune out, to keep our prayers small and safe and focused on ourselves.

Takeaway number three is that **since salt is found in tears, the salt of the earth is a community that welcomes tears.**

Number four. When I went to Israel and Jordan in 2018, one of the many amazing experiences I had was going to the Dead Sea. And I remember kind of reluctantly squeezing into my swimsuit and wrapping up in a sarong and picking my steps carefully down the rocky beach and then finally wading very slowly into the water, being very careful because you absolutely cannot get that salty mineral water in your ears or eyes or mouth or you will get very sick. And I waded over to some people from my Church of the Resurrection tour group and they were just sitting in the water, laughing. And it is the wildest thing, because you kind of squat a little bit, like you're going to sit down, but before you start sinking at all, the water kind of catches you, and there's so much salt in the water that it just lifts you up, like a chair, and it's very startling, nothing in the world like any body of water I have ever experienced, and then I floated I started laughing, too, me and all these Midwestern, middle-aged Methodists in our floppy hats and conservative swimsuits, just floating and laughing our patooties off for the sheer joy of it. I can't even think about that experience without smiling.

And isn't it ironic that in the lowest body of water on the earth, we can float so high? It's because of all that salt. The Dead Sea is ten times saltier than the ocean, so we can't help but float in it. And when we as followers of Jesus, when we as the body of Christ are really, really salty, when we really let the love of God flow through us, when we see potential, and encourage,

and accept, and walk with people, and persevere with them, **we can lift each other up like nobody else.** And we can do that even in the lowest of places . . .

Which brings me to our fifth take-away, which is: you are the salt of the earth. But not you all by yourself, and not me all by myself. A little salt does go a long way, but it takes a church, it takes a community of faith, to be salt. Jesus was speaking to his followers as a group—he didn't say, "You, Peter, or you, Mary Magdalene, all by yourself, are salt"—it was their connection to each other through him, it was the good things they did together that made the disciples salt. And salt all by itself doesn't do much. It's the way it interacts with other things, like food and water and the human body, that makes salt special. We do not fulfill our purpose by simply trying to add to the salt shaker, but by letting ourselves be sprinkled and shaken and scattered wherever God needs us.

We are the salt of the earth. I wonder how God will use us next . . .