

5th Sunday after Epiphany
“You are the Salt of the World”
Matthew 5: 13-20

*Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord,
that Your Word may season our lives with your love.*

A recent internet headline all but screamed: “Americans need to cut down on saturated fat”. The article continued that in order to reverse the trend of obesity within American society, Americans also needed to cut down on their salt intake.

Now salt in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Within the human body, it keeps the water content up within our blood. It helps balance acid base levels. Salt is also helpful for the electrical impulses our brain fires off to our nerves and neurotransmitters.

Salt can add flavor to our food. Currently, there are a variety of salts on the market – regular, seasoned, Kosher, a salt substitute – to name a few. I found it amusing that earlier this week, the comic strip “Pickles” in Lancaster Intelligencer Journal talked about salt. One day focused on the different salts available. Another day focused on losing our sense of tasting salty foods. Even though it is not a food seasoning, we cannot forget rock salt – an outdoor staple this time of the year.

The suggested daily amount of salt within our diets is 2,400 milligrams. The reality is, sadly, that the average amount taken in is 5,000 mg. That is nearly twice the recommended daily amount.

With this in mind, we hear in today’s Gospel, “you are the salt of the world.” Given the cultural sensitivity to decreasing our salt intake, this does not mean Jesus is telling us to do less or be less in the world. Rather, Jesus wants us to be a seasoning in the world. Jesus wants us to bring out the flavor of peace, of harmony, of love, of kindness, of compassion, mercy, and justice. We bring out these flavors when we show kindness to our neighbor, or in the ways we provide care for one another.

During the Wednesday afternoon Bible study this week, we wrestled with the question of what does this part of Jesus’ words mean? What is the connection to the following statement of “you are the light of the world”? At first, the thought was expressed that it was a cultural comment that did not transfer over to today. We began to explore deeper the significance of salt in biblical times and why this saying may be important.

Salt was used within the temple rituals for Israel. It had cleansing and sacrificial uses as well. Salt was used within the preservation of food -- something still used today.

Our digging also revealed salt could make something useless. Consider that Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she refused to listen and looked back upon destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ezekiel turned good water into poor drinking water when he threw salt into the water.

Jesus was probably well aware of various cooking methods and the use of salt. In living by the Dead Sea, Jesus probably knew firsthand the preservative aspects of salt, and at the same time, the potential of having too much salt.

Salt was a highly valued commodity. It was so valued, that at one point, people were paid in salt. Perhaps you have heard the saying about a person being "worth their salt". This meant a person was worth the amount of salt they were paid.

Like Ezekiel throwing salt into good drinking water, if salt is mixed with the wrong combination of products, it can be harmful -- or it can lose its effectiveness. If rock salt gets moisture in it before melting ice, the rock salt is not as effective as if it had remained dry.

Perhaps you have seen our green bucket of rock salt in the foyer. In the bucket there is a sign that reads: "use sparingly -- a little does a lot".

"Use sparingly -- a little does a lot". That can apply to our lives as Christian as well. Yet our challenge is that like salt, we too can lose our effectiveness. We can lose our effectiveness as Christians when we go with the status quo rather than going against the flow. We can lose our effectiveness when we fail to come together to share in the community of Christ gathered here this morning. We can lose our effectiveness when we begin to follow our thoughts and actions rather than God's.

When we accidentally get salt into a wound or paper cut, the salt can burn or sting. In our relationships with one another, we need to be like salt. We need to preserve that which needs to be preserved. At the same time, we need to challenge that which needs to be challenged. We need "flavor" -- and variety -- for variety is the spice of life. In our challenging of one another, -- *the saltiness of the challenge for change, over time, becomes the preservative that keeps one alive. . . .Challenge leads to change that leads to perseverance. . .*(Charles James Cook in "Feasting on the Word" pg. 334).

The mixed blessing of Jesus telling us to be salt of the world ties in with Jesus also saying we are light of the world. When we let our lights shine, when we act as salt in the world, we reflect God's love and mercy into the world. Yesterday as the Sunday School and youth serenaded our homebound members, we frequently sang "This Little Light of Mine", especially the line "I'm gonna let it shine." We sang about being a light into the world – and bearing witness. When we bear witness of God in our lives, we are indeed like a city on a hill. We are like a beacon so that others can see this light.

Being a city on a hill and letting our light shine is a matter also of using the gifts we have first been given in service to God and to others. It means being bold in using our gifts.

I've often wondered what Jesus means when he continues by saying no one lights a lamp and sets it under the lampstand. It would be as if we were to light a candle and place it under our bed. Not only would anyone not see this light, we would also run the risk of setting our bed on fire! When we light a candle in our homes, we light it for all to see.

And that's what Jesus is calling us to do. Not to call attention to ourselves, but rather, to be bold in our witness. In being bold in our witness, Jesus is challenging us to be like salt to season our lives and those of others with our kind words, thoughts, and actions. Through this boldness, we are like a light that brightly shines.

Seeing a light shine in darkness is easier to see than salt. At some point in our lives, there have been times where we have been in the dark. It may have been literal when we did not understand something. It may be physical if the power went out. It may have been spiritual when we felt as though God was absent from us. The darkness may have been personal as we struggled in a relationship either with God or with another person. Being in the dark is a common experience.

Being in the dark can also be a scary experience. Once we do get light in the darkness, we need to search the shadows and the edges of the darkness. Yet sometimes being a light into the world also means shining the light within our own lives – to see those painful places where we want to hide – from ourselves, from others, from God. We cannot bring the light of Christ to others if we are not aware of the places within our lives where the light of God's love needs to shine.

It can be painful to look at those places in our lives we may not necessarily want to see. It can be difficult – but it can be done in courage, in hope for healing, and in confidence that the Light of the World can and will guide through the dark days, and into the light of God's love.

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the one true faith, that you may be both salt and light for the world. Amen.