

“Salt”
Luke 14:34-35
 Sermon by Jan Edmiston
 Fairlington Presbyterian Church
 March 11, 2007 – Lent 3

Salt has gotten a bad name in the past 50 years. It could give you a stroke if you have high blood pressure. It rusts out your car when snow removal trucks drop it on the road. And salty language is not recommended, of course– at least from a pulpit.

“Salt Free Foods” would have been unheard of in Jesus’ day. Salt was a part of daily life – at the table, in the temple, even at the bedside.

When Jesus was born – under normal circumstances at least (in a bedroom instead of a cave) – his newborn body would have been rubbed with salt. His family would have salted sacrifices before presenting them to God in the temple.

If Jesus had had a toothache as a boy, his mother would have put salt in the cavity to soothe the pain. And in the kitchen, his parents would have packed their fish and meat in salt to preserve it.¹

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When I was a child, eating Sunday dinner at my grandparents’ home, I remember that my grandmother did not use salt shakers. Instead, every setting at the table had – beside the knife – had a tiny crystal salt cellar with a tiny silver spoon. We loved this about dinner at grandmother’s house. After she died, this is what everybody wanted to inherit – the collection of salt cellars with the tiny spoons. It seemed so elegant and quaint and grandmotherly. She was “salt of the earth” with a dash of elegant living.

I don’t know that Jesus’ family used individual salt cellars, but if you look closely in Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting of *The Last Supper*, you can see that DaVinci painted a piece of bread and an individual salt bowl in front of Jesus and each of the disciples. More about that later.

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More wars have been fought over salt than over gold.² It was used in some cultures as money. In ancient Greece, slaves were purchased with salt, and if a slave

¹ Malott, H.R., Chief Field Representative of The Salt Institute. “Salt and Christianity,” 1970.
<http://www.saltinstitute.org/pubstat/malott.html>

turned out to be a lazy worker, his owner might say: “He isn’t worth his salt.” This is where we get the phrase.³

The Romans, during Jesus’ day, paid their soldiers – partially – with salt. Their salt rations were called – in Greek – *salarium argentum* which is where we get the word “salary.”⁴

Clearly – salt has a significant place in world history, in world economies and warfare. Watch the movie *Gandhi* and you’ll see that salt set India free from British rule.

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When Jesus was explaining to people how they were supposed to live, he always used common metaphors that would have made sense to his hearers. He talked about fields and seeds and sheep and coins – because all those things were a part of their First Century World.

If Jesus was here today, he’d probably use metaphors having to do with Starbucks and American Idol and poor Anna Nicole Smith.

But in the First Century, he talked about salt.

Jesus preached one very long sermon in the Gospel According to Matthew – it might have gone on for days – and we have probably all heard bits of this sermon. It’s called “The Sermon on the Mount” because Jesus was on a mountainside overlooking the Sea of Galilee.⁵

The Sermon on the Mount includes The Beatitudes (“*Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.*”). It also includes these sayings which might be familiar to you:

*Turn the other cheek.*⁶

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*⁷

*Judge not lest you be judged.*⁸

² *Ibid.*

³ “The History of Salt,” The Salt Institute. <http://www.saltinstitute.org/38.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Matthew 5:1

⁶ Matthew 5:39

⁷ Matthew 5:44

⁸ Matthew 7:1

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers The Lord’s Prayer.⁹ He taught them The Golden Rule.¹⁰ And he taught them this:

***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.***¹¹

In the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus also preached a long sermon (not quite as long as Matthew’s version) including these same teachings, but – according to Luke – it wasn’t preached on a mountainside; it was preached “on a level place.” We call Luke’s version The Sermon on the Plain.¹²

The way Luke wrote the sayings of Jesus, he sprinkled them throughout his version and so what we might find in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, might be said in a completely different place and time in Luke’s version.

For example: Jesus was on the road, traveling towards Jerusalem in Luke’s version. He was stopping for dinner at the homes of Pharisees. He was hanging out with sinners. And the closer he got to Jerusalem, the more difficult his words became, which of course made people increasingly uncomfortable.

Jesus had just told one large crowd that if you follow him, you must be prepared to “hate your family” if that’s what it takes to be a disciple.¹³ And then he said that if you wanted to follow him, you had to “take up your own cross and follow.”¹⁴

In this culture, nobody wanted anything to do with a cross. What was he talking about? Imagine a preacher today saying, “If you want to be a Christian, you have to carry your own electric chair before you can be a part of this movement.” What?!

So it’s in this context that Jesus says this:

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

This sounds like a mild enough message. “Salt is good”? – Well of course, salt is good. Everybody knew that.

But what’s this about salt losing its taste? (Not to mention the part about the manure pile.)

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⁹ Matthew 6:9ff

¹⁰ Matthew 7:12

¹¹ Matthew 5:13

¹² Luke 6:17 - 49

¹³ Luke 14:26

¹⁴ Luke 14:27

I don't know about you, but there have been times when I've kept the same cylindrical box of Morton's table salt in my kitchen cabinet for years – maybe even for a decade – and it never goes bad. It's not really possible for salt to lose its taste, or at least it takes a long, long, long time.

Tip to new cooks out there: **you can keep a box of salt for ages** and it's still good. Not like dried parsley or basil. They lose their flavor and their color and you have to toss them after a while.

But salt stays good for what seems like forever. What's Jesus talking about here about salt losing its taste?

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Scholars tells us that ancient salt was not pure sodium chloride. It had other material in it which would decrease the flavoring in the salt.

In fact, much of the salt used in Jesus' day came from the Dead Sea. If you could imagine a small circle with a line snaking down and connecting to a larger circle, you can imagine a map of ancient Palestine. There was the Sea of Galilee at the top (the little circle) where Peter and the other fishermen caught fresh fish. The Jordan River snaked down towards the south. And as you move farther south, the water becomes saltier, until you get to The Dead Sea – so salty that a 500 pound person can still float in it.

On the shores of The Dead Sea are salt deposits, but they are mixed with sand. Today, there are ways to separate the salt and the sand, but in Jesus' day, the sand and the salt looked so similar that it was quite possible to have very sandy salt. It was far from pure.

And this was a problem. If you seasoned your food with impure salt, your food would rot. And this is Jesus' point:

If we are like impure salt, with no real taste and no real ability to do any good, then nothing will be preserved, nothing will be seasoned, and life around us will rot. What Jesus was saying here was essentially as shocking as his words about hating one's family or carrying a cross around if we want to follow him.

We are supposed to be like salt. Good salt.

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Back to Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. It's hard to see because of the age of the painting, but if you look very closely at the details of the table – as I mentioned – you can see that Da Vinci gave each person at the table his own piece of bread and his own salt bowl. But **Judas' bowl of salt is overturned.**

In Biblical thought, salt symbolized permanence and eternity. The reason Jesus and his family would have used salt on their sacrifices before offering them to God in the temple was because of something in the Old Testament book of Leviticus:

You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.¹⁵

Leonardo Da Vinci was a genius. He painted Judas' salt bowl as overturned to illustrate that Judas had broken the covenant. He was about to betray God's Son, and therefore betray God.

Judas had lost his salt. His bread, his sustenance was going stale.

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If we do not keep that eternal agreement God has with us – the human beings whom God has called “his children” – then we too are going to be spiritually stale. **A life without salt “is neither fit for the soil nor for the manure pile.** (Yikes.)

What does this mean exactly?

It means that we are supposed to keep the covenant – the agreements – that God has, through history, asked us to keep. And you can't know what those agreements are unless you are familiar with this book. We are supposed to preserve God's Word.

A quick word here about “preservation.”

Some of us want very much to “preserve” certain things in the church, but we need to separate the salt from the sand. God does not call us to preserve *traditions that we hold dear* that are more a part of our preferences instead of God's commandments.

We might rue the fact that people don't dress up for worship anymore. We might dislike the fact that the songs are different or the people are different. But there's nothing in God's Word about having to wear certain clothing to worship God. There's nothing in God's Word about singing one kind of music over another.

There's a lot in here, though, about caring for the poor, for healing the sick, and offering hospitality to the stranger.

We are supposed to be “salt” not to preserve human made traditions, but **to preserve God-commanded practices.**

And here's another thing about salt:

¹⁵ Leviticus 2:13. “Because of its use as a preservative, salt became a token of permanence to the Jews of the Old Testament. Its use in Hebrew sacrifices as a meat purifier came to signify the eternal covenant between God and Israel.” <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,925341-2,00.html>.

When we use salt, it loses itself. After mixing the salt into our food, we can't see it anymore. It makes its contribution and then it dissolves.

We are not supposed to “season” life in order to bring attention to ourselves. **It's not about us.** It's not about being the life of the party, or being the one who makes everything better.

We are called to be the salt of the earth because it brings about God's kingdom on the earth. It makes the world the way God created it to be.

We may be regular Sunday worshippers. We may lead respectable lives, maybe even talking about our church with others. It's fairly easy to appear to be “the salt of the earth.” But if we have lost our saltiness, Jesus says here that we are not good for anything. If we fail to keep the eternal Word of God, if we fail to season life as Jesus did it, then we are only sand – and we may as well be tossed out onto the ground . . . or into the manure pile. (If I could use saltier language from this pulpit, I might call it something else.)

A final word:

We are all here today because we are practicing our faith. But if we really want to follow Jesus, we won't just practice our faith on Sundays. Imagine how silly it sounds to use salt only one day a week.

The rest of the week also needs seasoning. And as we get closer and closer to Holy Week, closer and closer to Jerusalem, closer and closer to our deaths as well as to Jesus' death – remember that **we are running out of time to season this world with goodness and savory, restorative love.** And God knows the world is in tremendous need of seasoning.