

February 9, 2020 Salt-Seasoning brings out God-Flavours Matthew 5:13-20

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A few years back at this time of year, David Lewis and I and 30 others bicycled in Florida with a group called 'Wandering Wheels'. We went on the east coast from Cocoa Beach to Juno Beach and then returned largely following the route of A1A highway and the Intercoastal waterway. What did we do after biking 500 kilometres and returning to the motel we started at? Of course, we hopped in the shower and rinsed off that latest layer of perspiration, the kind of sweat that is loaded with saltiness. Then we crossed the street and loaded ourselves up with a Mcburger or downed a fish sandwich laden with salt. In fact, on one of those trips I remember a rather dramatic event involving salt. On a day we cycled 100 kilometres, a man of our group named Paul, lay down after having a shower to have a brief nap. Paul had been feeling a bit under the weather before things began, but he never expected that on laying down for a rest, his joints would ache so much that he could not even move without struggling. His wife Anne went to the leader, we call 'coach' and described the situation. Coach, Bob Davenport, took up a salt shaker, poured out a spoonfull and invited Paul to down it with a glass of water. He did and within an hour he was moving quite normally once again. Salt is essential to our existence and when we expel it with other minerals from our body in excess, we cannot function properly. It appears that Paul's blood had become low in sodium content. Salt is important to us!

Last week the meditation was on the beginning words of the Sermon on the Mount, those words we know as the beatitudes. Our reading for today follows the Beatitudes where Jesus was saying, "No matter how insignificant you think you are, or how poorly the world has treated you, you are important to God and you can make a difference in the world." For the rest of the "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus teaches how to live to make that difference. He begins by saying, "You're the salt of the earth. But if you've lost your saltiness, what good are you?"

Salt is a rich image. It was used in the Hebrew scriptures as an image of the law and covenant. In Leviticus 2:13 we read put salt on every grain offering because salt represents the covenant between you and God. The salt would also preserve the grain so that it could actually be used by the temple priests. Salt was a valuable commodity in the ancient world. As well as being an important preservative, it was an antiseptic healing agent. Pouring salt on wounds hurt, but it also healed them. Then as now it was used to enhance flavour and stimulate thirst.

Awhile ago, I came across an explanation of the use of salt in Jesus' time. In that time animal manure was used for fertilizing the soil but also for a source of fuel in outdoor ovens. Salt was used as a "leveling agent" in paddies made from animal manure. Young family members would form paddies with this animal dung, mix in salt from a salt block, and let the paddies dry in the sun. When the fuel paddies were lit in an oven, the mixed-in salt would help the paddies burn longer, with a more even heat. Then, when the fuel was burnt out, the family would throw out that spent fuel onto the road for a secondary use, to harden a muddy surface.

So, we're to be the salt. We're the ones that help the fuel burn longer. We're the ones called to help the fuel burn brighter. We are called to be the salt of the earth. One source I read this week said, "Jesus saw his followers as leveling agents in an impure world. Their example would spread faith to those mired in the cultural 'dung.' But if their example rang empty, they were worthless; they would be dug into the mud under the heels of critics."

You, and you and you are the salt of the earth. Jesus didn't tell his disciples that they could become the salt of the earth if they did such and such. He said, "You're it. You're the salt of the earth. If you've lost your saltiness you're not much good for anything. You might as well be thrown out with the trash." Look around you, look at the people sitting beside you. You are the salt of the earth. Heaven forbid if you've lost your saltiness.

Salt adds flavour. You don't need much to make a difference. In our society where too many of us use too much salt to the detriment of our health, it is a bit difficult to understand how important and valued and valuable salt was to the ancient world. A Roman author of the time wrote, "there is nothing as necessary as salt and son (entitled to the father's inheritance)." Wars were fought over it, soldiers were paid with it, cities were built around it. It was essential and expensive. A little went a long way and it was appreciated. Jesus calls us to flavour the world with that peacemaking, justice seeking, compassion sharing that was in the Beatitudes. Your kind word, your generous act, your ability to forgive, your willingness to stand with the oppressed—all that flavours the world. You are the salt of the world.

Salt is also a preservative. The disciples of Jesus, the church has always been the preserver of morality. Lots of people these days like to dump on religion for the immoral acts that have been committed in its name, but religion has always reminded the people of what is true and good and right. What is it that we need to preserve as disciples of Jesus in Canada in 2020? We are responsible for preserving what is good and right and true. Worker's rights, universal health care, peacekeeping, caring for creation— all these things were developed by people of Christian faith. Why is it that we today who claim to be Christians are not front and centre in the fight to preserve them? We who have read the Sermon on the Mount know that greed is not the ultimate value and profit is not the sole purpose of life. When was the last time you heard a conversation that went, "As a Christian I have a moral obligation to care for the poor, so I think we should be increasing our taxes and putting more resources into affordable housing." Now we are responsible for preserving the earth itself. Our Bible tells us that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, not ours to plunder and destroy. You are the salt of the earth.

Salt is a healing agent. It heals but it hurts. My wife, Jean was called by the school principal to come and pick up our son when he was seven. He had been playing tag on the playground equipment, something he was not supposed to do, and had taken a leap off of it to avoid being caught, something else he was not supposed to do and had hurt his arm. He knew that he had been doing what he was not supposed to do so he just went into class when the bell rang but a friend told the principal that he had hurt himself. When the principal checked it out he called and Jean went and took him to emerg. Two X-rays and a plaster cast later we left. John was very sullen. "I don't like that doctor," he said. Jean thought he had been just fine. John said, "I don't like him. My arm still hurts. When that other doctor fixed my eye, it didn't hurt anymore." We had been to emerg a few weeks earlier with a scratched cornea from a branch that hit him when he was climbing a tree. They anesthetize a cornea to examine it (use some spray to 'freeze it'), then patch it and send you on your way. Once it's anesthetized, it doesn't hurt. But his broken arm still hurt when he left the hospital. But it didn't hurt for long enough because within a few days we were back in the hospital getting the plaster cast redone. We didn't want the pain in our pocketbook, in the first place, of paying the extra to get a fiberglass one put on. But, after a few more trips, we paid for the fiberglass. None of us likes to admit that fixing our messes is sometimes painful. We prefer the just anesthetize me approach but the mess doesn't go away. We all know that our dependence on fossil fuels has got to stop but some of us go on a Florida holiday just so we can ride a bike. We know that our civic infrastructure needs repair

and that our medical system and education system are on the edge but we think we can somehow fix them without paying more taxes. Some people will say that the church shouldn't be involved in politics, but Jesus said, you are the salt of the earth, you have to heal it when it is hurt and we live in a hurting world.

At the end of 2019 a movie came on to the big screen entitled, "Harriet". It tells the story of Harriet Tubman. Harriet was actually the new name she took when she changed from slave to a 'free woman'. Harriet's mother was a slave, so she became one too. Harriet was tougher and stronger than most. She could lift huge barrels and pull heavy carts like an ox. The overseers valued her for her strength and perhaps even had a little fear about her as she did not stay silent. Once Harriet stepped between a fleeing slave and the overseer who was going to whip the other slave. A heavy weight was thrown at Harriet knocking her unconscious. The lasting result were sleeping spells that would come on all of a sudden.

Harriet along with many others, became knowledgeable about the underground railroad. The slaves would sing their songs in the fields which spoke of the promised land and the North Star. To the slave these were signals about fleeing north of the Mason-Dixon line, the border that separated the slave-owning Southern states from the Northern free states.

Eventually Harriet's resolve became so great (1849) that she plotted an escape with hopes of other family members joining her. They had various reasons for not taking the chance, while she escaped on her own. She walked stealthily through heavily forested areas and by night, sometimes sheltered by white families for 100 miles to cross in to the free state of Pennsylvania. "When I found I had crossed that line," she said after, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

But freeing herself was not enough for Harriet. Most everyone tried to dissuade her, but Harriet returned to her homeland region again and again to free others. She became a 'conductor' for the Underground Railroad. In the film, Tubman is portrayed as a deeply religious woman whose psychic visions aided her many dangerous journeys. Historians say, "she was intensely faithful. That strong sense of faith was somewhat typical on the Eastern Shore, that Methodist kind of intensity," As for her dreamlike visions, an overseer struck Tubman on the head with a heavy weight as a 13-year-old, and she suffered seizures for the rest of her life. Tubman believed those seizures were prophetic. "She believed that God was speaking to her and guiding her, telling her what to do and protecting her."

Throughout her life Harriet took on many different roles, always denouncing slavery as an affront to God and humans. She fought in the Civil War and used her talents in many ways. At one point she was a scout and spy using skills learned in her Underground Railway experience. Later in life her mission was to help every black person who came in trouble to her door. After putting up a fight she was given an army pension and she continued in the battle for freedom. She continued the struggle to win the vote, better education and to work towards ending segregation. Harriet who, in her strident activist days, came to be called 'Moses' lived with faith and courage to be 93 years of age.

When Martin Luther preached on this passage four hundred years ago, he said salt preserves but salt also bites. He told priests that when the people in the congregation sin, you are to rub the salt into the wounds of their sins. That is not real friendly, is it? You are to rub the salt into the wounds of their sins. In one of his critiques against the church of his time he said, "Bishops and successful clergy are the smartest of people, for they preach in a calculated manner in order to keep themselves out of trouble by refusing to salt the sins of their people and press for genuine

repentance.” We are the salt of the earth. If we are not willing to name our personal and corporate sinfulness and make the painful changes necessary to turn things around, well then, we’re not worth our salt. God is going to toss us into the oblivion our heritage buildings and find someone else to flavour, preserve and heal the world. But for now, you are the salt of the earth.

When you go out of your way to help someone through a journey with cancer, you salt the earth. When you welcome newcomers into the building to participate in a support group, or children’s fellowship, you salt the earth. When you visit and perhaps even pray with a senior in institutional care, you salt the earth. Even a small bit of salt can flavour the whole stew and the light that shines through us cannot be put out. Amen.