

Epiphany 5 – A (2020)
Matthew 5:13-20

Salt water is pretty useless.

Sure, it plays a critical role in the delicate balance of the global ecosystem, but, apart from that, for the average Joe or Jane, salt water is just regular water's annoying cousin. Apart from nursing the occasional sore throat or putting together a stellar fish tank, what good is salt water? Think about it. You can't drink the stuff, you can't water the lawn with it, and it feels so weird after swimming around in it that, if you're normal, you immediately jump in the shower to remove it.

Useless.

For most people today, salt is a seasoning, its use is a matter of personal taste (balanced against doctors' warnings to avoid sodium, of course). Part of any initial difficulty we may have in understanding our Bible passage for today comes from the present-day use of salt. We think of salt simply as a flavoring, a spice sometimes receiving bad press for its role in causing high blood pressure. So common is our use of salt that for people on salt-restricted diets, it can sometimes be a struggle to find palatable low-sodium or sodium-free foods. Salt is everywhere, in everything. It is a thing of uncertain value and importance.

Not so in Jesus' day. In the first century world, salt was a precious commodity that served a variety of crucial purposes. Sometimes used as wages instead of coinage, salt was best known as a preservative. Before refrigeration, salted foods were the lifeline to survival when fresh foods became scarce. Salt was also used as a disinfectant—think "salt in the wounds".

A man is "worth his salt" if he does a good job. The very word "salary" is from the Latin for "salt," a reflection of the fact that part of a Roman soldier's pay was in the form of salt. When marching in the hot Mediterranean world, a man sweated heavily under all that armor with a pack on his back. It was necessary to replace the salt lost through sweat.

A person is said to be "below the salt" if his or her status seats them closer to the foot of the table than where the salt is placed. The

higher-status folks are seated toward the host's end of the table and get first dibs on the salt. Those "below the salt" must wait their turn and take the chance that those above will not use it all.

The phrase "the salt of the earth" is not original with Jesus. A generous and dependable person had been known by this phrase for millennia.

On the other hand, the words of someone who is undependable are "taken with a grain of salt."

Every Brit and not only Brits, who having spilled salt, will throw some of it over the left shoulder to avoid the bad luck that is sure to follow. Down in the British kitchens, salt was and is the cleanser of choice for cast iron pans and Dutch ovens. When the food was done, the cook would salt the pan heavily and set it aside. The salt kills any bacteria that cling to the iron. When it comes time to wash up, hot water, a stiff brush, and the salt scours the pan, leaving a clean, burnished surface that allows for low-oil or oil-free cooking.

Even when bathing, the people have learned that bath salts and salt scrubs help to clear away dead skin, dirt, and bacteria, leaving healed skin clean.

Salt's ability to act as a preservative - giving long-life to all it permeated - led the Old Testament prophets to use salt as a symbol of the eternal covenant God made with the Hebrew people (see Leviticus 2:13, Numbers 18:19, 2 Chronicles 13:5) -- naming it the "covenant of salt."

Baptismal water traditionally contains salt -- both to purify the water and to mark the person as belonging to God. Salt has been used from ancient times in marking those who are dedicated to God and/or the service of God.

One of the big sellers in specialty food stores is sea salt. Trace amounts of minerals found in seawater persist in the salt after the water has evaporated, and are reputed to have extra health benefits.

The doctors of the Mayo Clinic disagree. For the most part, sea salt is sodium chloride, just like salt dug from a mine or manufactured in a laboratory. The quantity of other minerals is negligible.

Some claim sea salt is lower in sodium than regular salt. While it's true that a teaspoon of sea salt has slightly less sodium than a teaspoon of regular salt, that's only because its grains are bigger. That

means less salt fits onto your teaspoon. Grind sea salt as fine as the other stuff, and there's no difference.

Like kosher salt, sea salt generally isn't iodized -- it doesn't have iodine added to it. Use sea salt exclusively, and avoid other foods with naturally-occurring iodine, and you could end up with a goiter (which is the reason iodine is added to salt in the first place).

Salt is salt, wherever it comes from: which is pretty much what Jesus is saying. The good news is the same, no matter which disciples happen to be seasoning the neighborhood.

Those who seek to follow the spiritual life are like salt in the world. Salt crystals cannot give flavor to food unless they dissolve. If we dissolve the salt in a pot, it disappears but it does not cease to exist. Indeed, it can then give flavor to thousands of grains of rice. It is the same with us. If we are not dissolved in the waters of God's love, if we are not melted in the fire of God's Holy Spirit, if we do not sacrifice ourselves completely, then we cannot pass on to even a single soul the blessed experience of the spiritual life.

In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount Jesus looks out over his followers and proclaims, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (v. 13).

Those are tough words, but in order to understand them, we need to grasp them from a first-century perspective. Jesus' point is that those who belong to him, who live under his reign and rule in this world, are just like salt. When it's out of the water, it's incredibly useful and surprisingly valuable. Not because we enhance a great steak but because we can make the kingdom of God known.

Jesus wants his disciples to be the salt of the earth (v. 13). John Calvin, one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church, nicely explains the significance of this image:

... that it is their [Christians'] office to salt the earth because men have nothing in them but what is tasteless, till they have been seasoned with the salt of heavenly doctrine. (Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. XVI/1, p. 270)

Human beings, sinners that we are, do not taste very good apart from the salt of Christian doctrine. All the more reason we should not

get too carried away with our importance in salting the earth. In fact, salt is not the main course for a good meal. People can still live good lives without getting salted by us. In fact, some foods are ruined by our salt or are pre-salted. So it is wise that we not get carried away by our importance as salt for the earth. Come to think of it, Calvin has an even more powerful reminder. In the preceding quotation he makes clear that we are not even the salt people need. The real salt is the salt of Christian doctrine, and we are the waiters/waitresses who serve it.

The Sermon on the Mount, which we heard last week, contains words of blessing and expectation for followers of Jesus. You, in the midst of these crowds you see gathering around you, are salt of the earth and light of the world, but you are only valuable, you are only salty, if you remain in Christ and Christ remains in you.

There is requirement in this blessing and expectation. To be useful salt, salt that people will value, the salt must remain salty. And to be light that does any good in the world, it must be made visible to all.

The Marshfield Clinic has done us a favor for today. A while back, in television commercials and on billboards, there was a message touting the value of the medical care at the Marshfield Clinic. People may be able to live without the medical care provided by the Marshfield Clinic, but with it, people can "Shine!" Don't just live, "Shine!" the ads said. Without the light of Christ from within us, the world and the people around us and even this Church will not be able to shine. To be a follower of Jesus, to really live, we must be salt and light.

So, shine that light! In the face of the claims of the kingdoms of this world, there may be serious temptation to hide the light to escape notice. "No," Jesus says. "Shine! Shine brightly! Light your world. Carry your candle. Go to the highest places and the most threatened people, those who are longing for hope and good news and shine, shine, shine!"

In short, God's people are called to season and preserve the world and to shine brightly the light of Christ that has been given to us so that the world may see the glory of the One revealed only in Jesus the Christ.