



ADD SALT TO FAST
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 58: 1-2; MATTHEW 5:13-20
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Matthew 5:13-20

5:13 "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.

5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

5:15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

5:18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

5:19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

A Story of Salt and Light

It's the kind of news you don't want to hear. She needed brain surgery. My sister, my bright and gentle sister, had an aneurysm.

Around her ICU bed after surgery, we felt relief and joy. Things had gone so well.

My parents even headed back home, and another sister, too. Things were moving in a good direction.

Change happened rapidly. First a horrible head ache, that nothing could relieve. Then, my gentle, quiet sister became agitated. She wanted to get out of bed, she couldn't be reasoned with. "What's happening," she begged me to answer, with fear in her sweet eyes, eyes that seem to look past me into some other dimension.

Her agitation then gave way to strange sleep. At first it was a relief, but then it felt like she was fading. She was not responsive.

In just a matter of a few hours, my bright and gentle sister was seizing and we couldn't figure out what was going on.

Everyone was called back. We felt her slipping away.

This is a story about a lot of things—a lot of things I can't tell you here—a story of family, a story of lives changed forever. But most of all this is a story of salt and light.

They finally figured out that my sister's body was in a free fall because some switch had been flipped—maybe from extreme pain, maybe a glitch in the brain—that told her body to dump all the sodium in her system. And without salt, we cannot live.

Sodium levels create equilibrium; they moderate blood pressure, nerve function, and hydration of cells, muscles, and fluid levels in the body. Salt is a key ingredient for life—and its power comes in balancing relationships with the entire system.

The doctors explained that you just can't go in and quickly replace sodium to get the body back to a healthy state. You have to do it slowly, monitoring the relationship of sodium to other factors in the body. Replacing sodium too quickly can cause harm that cannot be repaired, even death.

For days she was unresponsive, no light in her eyes; her body, we hoped, was slowly recalibrating to some delicate balance that would bring her back to us.

And so we waited for salt and light.

Salt is used to preserve, to refine, to purify. And at the time Jesus spoke these words, salt was a precious commodity.

Eating salt with someone was a sign of friendship and loyalty.

And any cook worth their salt (!) knows that salt is a time tested way to prepare meat for consumption.

When salt first hits the meat, it pulls the moisture OUT. That's why meat will be dry if you salt it too late, right before cooking.

But if you give salt time to penetrate the meat, the meat starts to take the moisture back in. Salt reacts to the proteins of the muscle fibers in meat and in time salt actually dissolves them slightly making the meat tender.

And because the meat is tender, softened, it absorbs the salt flavor and any other seasoning you might add.

If you don't think ahead, and you don't get your meat salted before you cook but you want to achieve the same result that timely salting achieves, there are options. One cookbook puts it this way: you can "squish it, hack it, or drown it."

When time is short, when we didn't think ahead, maybe even when we are impatient, we can choose between different forms of violent force to get what we want.

The slow, gentle, and potent ways of salt stands in contrast to the force of the meat mallet.

The wisdom of my Mississippian grandmother was that you use salt in all cooking early and often—along with butter of course.

A vivid memory of my grandmother is the mournful tone in which she told us that the doctor had told her she needed to cut back on salt. "Truly!" my grandmother said to my mother (who's name is Truly), "Truly, he told me to leave the salt off the table."

Too much salt is not good for you. Not enough salt is not good for you. Salt that has lost its saltiness is not worth a thing. Forget the salt and your options become more forceful.

And Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth."

That's you and me! That's us! Salt. Salt of the earth.

What Jesus is saying here is categorically different than what this phrase, "salt of the earth," has come to mean. When we say someone is salt of the earth we mean that person is a good person, down to earth, strong stock, dependable, and trustworthy.

Jesus is not talking about the moral status of a person, he is talking about the **function** of the church—we are not to try and be like salt, we ARE salt. And

we are not just salt in the church or in our families. We are salt of the earth—preserving, seasoning, creating well-being and balance, opening, bringing the things that are out of whack into God’s intended Kingdom state.

So when things are out of whack—it is the church’s purpose to address them. To be salt. That means injustice is our problem; that means a lack of mercy is our problem.

Fasting, God tells the exiled people of Israel, is not about personal piety. It is about community transformation.

It is the fruit of fasting that indicates the righteousness of the fast—not the act of fasting itself.

And fasting is clearly tied to justice and mercy—unjust, unmerciful relationships are a sure measure of an unrighteous fast.

Our spiritual and religious practices are empty if the relationships that define us are not just, are not loving, and are not merciful.

God is condemning false righteousness and empty, fruitless practice. What motivates us, what animates us, matters—and what folds out of our practices together matters.

Our fast must not be fruitless, our practices need salt! And salt doesn’t exist for its own sake, it exists for the affect, for the change, for the transformation it brings about in other things.

You are the salt of the earth.

Salt that has lost its saltiness is useless.

Did the church lose its saltiness?

Salt reacts with all the other factors around it—did the church get too mixed up, watered down, diluted by all the variables of the world around us. Did the church cede its salty job to sodium substitutes in our world, or worse yet to the human version of meat mallets—have we squandered our identity, our purpose, our saltiness?

Following Jesus requires us to be salt, it doesn’t invite us to discern whether we’d like to be salt or not—or whether we prefer to be sugar or lemon zest or oregano.

To let ourselves be salt, to be salted—is to let Jesus’ power sink in over time—to let him make us more porous, more open, more seasoned to being like him, to being his body in a world of betrayal and violence, and in a world of creativity and beautiful possibilities.

As Christians we are called to be open, not impenetrable, we are called to have an impact and affect on the world, not to be bland, not to blend in and go unnoticed.

Salty Christians become more open over time. And Jesus is calling disciples who are not afraid to be salt—who are not afraid to soak in his truth and be changed, be refined, be preserved and seasoned and to be salt on this spinning planet we call home.

Neither salt nor light exists for themselves. Salt can only be salt in relationship with other things—and it is only salt when it has an impact—a seasoning, equalizing, opening impact. And light does not exist to bring attention to itself, but to shine so that we can see the world around us clearly. Light exists to illuminate.

Ours is a story of salt and light. Jesus calls us salt and light—this is not a call to individuals, it is not even a **call** to the church.

Salt and light are not our aspirations; they are the essence of who we are in the world.

If we have lost our saltiness, if we do not illuminate—then we are not the church. Then we are not those who can claim to taste and see the in breaking of the kingdom of God.

A fast without the fruits of justice is no fast at all—it is an act of vanity, even of futility. The fruits of our practices together are the true measure of who we are in this world—this world that needs salt to survive, that needs salt to thrive, this world that needs light to truly see itself, to know itself.

I was there by my sister’s bed when she woke up and said hello to life again. I can’t tell you how it felt—it was too real, too true—maybe you have had a moment like that—when hope breaks open a new beginning. When you stopped waiting for salt and light and realized anew the promise of right now to begin again.

The church is revitalized at this table—this table where hope breaks open a new beginning.

This is the place where we practice again and again what it means to be salt, to be light.

Because this is no ordinary meal—

- not an ordinary moment in time in a world where people hoard more than they need while others go hungry,
- not an ordinary place in a world where walls are built and doors are slammed shut,
- not an ordinary table, in a world where truth is hard to come by and where people use their power to betray trust instead of to build it.

This is a table of ENOUGH FOR ALL.

This is a table of A PLACE FOR ALL.

This is a table of TRUTH—HARD TRUTH—AND LIBERATING TRUTH.

This is a table whose power sinks in over time; this is a table that calls us beyond itself to embody Christ's love, Christ's mercy, and Christ's justice in all of who we are.

This is a table that says to us again you are SALT; you are LIGHT.

Thanks be to God.