

Matthew 5: 13-20
Epiphany 5A, preached on 6A
February 12, 2017
Lincoln Street UMC

Salt. It's a chemical term, actually. See you're all scientists and you didn't know it. Salt is the word used for "a substance produced by the reaction of an acid with a base."¹ What does that mean? Like getting out my apple cider vinegar and mixing it with my baking soda?

Well, the table salt that you most commonly see is sodium chloride. But ubiquitous as it is, it's not something you necessarily want to make at home. At least not after you read one person's description:

"When sodium, an unstable metal that can suddenly burst into flame, reacts with a deadly poisonous gas known as chlorine, it becomes the staple food sodium chloride, NaCl."²

But once one braves all the possible chemical explosions, there's a whole host of things this handy substance can do. Making ice cream freeze, whipping cream rapidly, getting more heat out of boiling water, removing rust, preserving food, putting out grease fires, making candles dripleless, killing poison ivy, healing wounds, and perhaps most near and dear to us recently, melting the ice off sidewalks and driveways.³

Let's face it, the substance is a wonder.

¹ Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History*, Penguin Books, 2003. Most scientific facts about salt are gleaned from this text.

² Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History*, Penguin Books, 2003.

³ Most of this list also comes from Kurlansky, *Salt*, which is quoting a Diamond Crystal Salt Company booklet.

Because we didn't even mention in all of that the most common use, which is to help enhance flavors in our cooking - it simply makes stuff taste good. Which is handy because our bodies rely on both sodium and chloride to run smoothly. Chloride aids in digestion and respiration. Sodium is what helps the body transport nutrients, stimulate nerve impulses and move muscles.

Now, I'm pretty sure that Jesus and his followers didn't know most of these handy uses for salt. Ice cream? What's that? But they *did* know of its great value in preserving foods - and in a hot, desert climate where foods went bad quickly, you can imagine the value. "Until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities."⁴ It was no coincidence that Gandhi's nonviolent resistance was the Salt March.

It was essential that people had access to salt and that it indeed, be, well, *salty*. It needed to have that familiar taste that evades words. As Jesus says, if it has lost its taste it might as well be thrown out.

When salt acquires too many impurities, then it loses that salty flavor and with that it loses its preservative properties.

So, when Jesus said they might as well throw it out, he was not being dismissive, but rather quite practical. It was a great risk to try to preserve food with salt that wasn't pure enough. The food would go bad and there too your chances at survival.

Today, however, salt comes as a bit of a mixed bag.

⁴ Kuransky, Salt.

Food producers have discovered that their merchandise sells better with more salt and so the American diet has become over-salted, to the point of health risks.

So while we need salt in order to keep all this working, too much of a good thing . . . is not such a good thing. And so it is difficult for us to fully appreciate what it meant to those listening to Jesus's teaching to hear that they were salt of the earth.

They knew salt to be the bedrock of their survival. They used salt in rituals to indicate God's lasting covenant. For Jesus to turn that around and tell them - tell *us* - that *we* are the salt of the earth. Well now, that was really saying something.

First, these words are affirmation. Each one of you is of immense value. You are as valuable as the salt that marks our relationship with God and keeps our bodies nourished and sustained.

But these words are also a call to those who hear them. As salt, we too are to bring such benefits to the world.

We are the children of God, called by our Creator, into a relationship with life that allows for God's mercy and love and kindness and faithfulness to shine forth.

Our saltiness, that immutable truth of who we are as children of God, is what enables us and encourages us to have our light shine.

Be assured, impurities are going to get in the way. But the concern about impurities is not one about piety and holiness, but rather about focus. Similar to Micah's words to his people: Do justice, love kindness, walk intentionally with God. Jesus is reminding us here to keep our saltiness. Keep that flavor that makes us who we are as children of God, keep that flavor pure and real.

When we can stay focused on who it is we are created to be, then we harness the energy of combustible rock and poisonous gas. We harness that energy in a new way that brings light and love and goodwill and reconciliation.

Just after empowering his listeners to be as focused and as powerful as salt, he reminds them that their saltiness is framed within the structure of Hebrew law.

So too, the strength and power of our saltiness comes from remembering who we are - salt! - but also to whom we belong - a God who dreams of justice and equity and peace.

We use our saltiness to bring food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, hope to the abandoned, sanctuary to those at risk.

"If that salt has lost its flavor it ain't got much in its favor." So let us remember that indeed we are the salt of the earth and let us be empowered to let that truth be what flavors our every decision, direction, and deed.

Amen.