
“Salt?”

A SERMON on Matthew 5:13-16 for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Preached 5 February 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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If you have ever gotten into bread baking, you probably know that good, simple, basic bread is made from just four ingredients: flour, water, yeast, and salt. Sure, there are all sorts of variations—different kinds of flour, different proportions of the basic ingredients, and other ingredients that you can add in, if you want, to create different varieties: milk, eggs, various spices, even fillings. But the basic recipe, the base upon which the rest is built, consists of those four foundational ingredients: flour, water, yeast, and salt.

Unless, that is... unless you are from central Italy or you're trying to make making the so-called “common bread”—the *pane commune*—that hails from that region. If so, then there's just *three* ingredients: flour, water, and yeast.

No salt.

When a friend of mine from university and I went on a European tour right after we completed our degrees, I remember our tour guide making a big point of this during one of the stops in Florence, Italy. The tour guide told us about some famous historical figure from that region of Italy—unfortunately, I don't remember who—who spoke high praise about their travels to some other land. Except the bread, that noted person said. *Too salty.*

And indeed, when you have the traditional central Italian bread made with no salt, you do notice the difference. As a writer for *Italy Magazine* puts it, “One of the most perplexing and, often, disappointing discoveries when visiting central Italy—including Umbria and vast swaths of Lazio, Tuscany, and Le Marche—is the bread. You sit down for your first meal at a postcard-perfect trattoria and reach into the bread basket expecting a slice of ‘Italian bread’: a thick, baguette-type loaf with a chewy, flavorful crumb and a crisp aromatic crust. Instead, you come up with a rather dismaying slice of “pane commune” [...]: a saltless loaf with a dense, dry crumb and crust tough enough to take out the roof of your mouth for days.”¹ Now, I don't specifically remember the tough crust, per se, but I do remember how remarkably bland and flavourless and simply “blah” that Italian bread we were offered was.

Most all of us, I imagine, are familiar with the impact that salt can make—whether noticing the blandness of bread from which it is absent, to puckering a bit as we sip a soup to which too much salt has been added, to noticing the difference it makes when added to dark chocolate or caramel.

It would be easy to assume, then, that as we arrive at this part of Jesus' well-known “Sermon on the Mount”—the first major episode we find in the gospel of Matthew of Jesus doing some teaching of his first followers... It would be easy to assume that Jesus is telling, commanding, challenging the disciples and crowds to *be* flavourful. To *be* salt, to *be* light. Don't just be bland and dull and unremarkable, we might assume he's saying.

That in and of itself might not be a bad message. Some of us are probably familiar with boring religion and boring Christians—the ones who seem like they're having *no fun at all*, the ones who look like they're so pure, so holy, and have such perfect fit and finish on their lives and their religiosity that they've become downright dull and uninteresting. We joke about how if

¹ Rebecca Winke, “Italy's Traditional Saltless Bread: A Guide for the Uninitiated”, *Italy Magazine*, 17 January 2019, <http://www.italymagazine.com/featured-story/italys-traditional-saltless-bread-guide-uninitiated>

heaven is where all these people go, then maybe heaven isn't all that desirable and exciting of a destination. Who wants to spend eternity with *them*, we wonder...

But at the end of the day, what we've heard isn't a simple admonition from Jesus for his followers to be a bit spicy, a bit more interesting. Because, you see, Jesus' proclamation isn't *be* salty, *be* light. Or even *you have* salt and *you have* light. No, my friends, it's a proclaiming of what already *is*: you *are* salt. You *are* light. All those folk who Jesus pronounced "blessed" in the famous "Beatitudes" passage we heard last week, Jesus is telling them that they already *are* the salt of the earth, they already *are* the light of the world. The poor, the meek, the peacemakers, those who yearn so much for a different and better world that it makes them mournful, those who put their neck out there so much for Jesus' ways that it gets them persecuted—these *are*, in fact, salt and light.

While we tend most often to think about salt as something that makes food taste better—a ubiquitous and cheap savoury seasoning we grab from the bottom shelf at the grocery store—for much of human history, salt was a scarce and limiting resource. While there were a few places where salt crystals were found on top of the ground waiting to be plucked up, and other places where salt deposits came close enough to the surface of the earth that humans could easily access it, most salt came from sea water. Getting salt from sea water relied on the sun or on the use of a burnable fuel to dry off the water—in other words, it was slow and it was expensive. If you didn't live near the ocean where you could make it yourself, you had to trade for salt. In fact, salt trade was once big business, driving massive economic empires. Cities we still know today, such as Venice, owe their rise to prominence to salt.

Without access to salt, rulers would lose their grip on their subjects. Without salt, populations could not grow, wars could not be fought, colonies could not be founded, soldiers could not be paid, and exploration could not happen. Why? It is simple: without salt, food could not be preserved. Before the invention of refrigeration and modern canning techniques, salt was the primary way by which food could be stored up, transported, and saved for times when fresh food was scarce. Simply put, salt was required for the preservation and sustenance of life; without salt, you would starve to death.

In other words, for our sisters and brothers who first heard Jesus speak these words, salt was not a pleasant seasoning to be used sparingly. Salt was *life*. Jesus stood, surrounded by the crowds who had come to hear him preach that day, and he proclaimed to them the Good News, "You are the salt of the earth; by you the world is preserved and sustained. You are the salt of the earth; by you life is given and shared. You are the salt of the earth, by you the world is fed."

Salt isn't, at the end of the day, the *thing* itself, of course. It doesn't serve itself or exist for its own sake. We don't simply eat spoonfuls of salt, or put it down on our roads and sidewalks because we like the white colour on the pavement and crunchy sound under our feet. Salt exists for the sake of something else.²

That's the flip-side, if you will, of the amazing thing that Jesus has proclaimed to these first followers of his. Even though, as best as we can figure out, they are a rag-tag group of people on the underside of society, Jesus has just named them as something essential, something necessary, something absolutely vital—to God and to the world. How awesome is that(?)! And... this essential, necessary, vital thing that they are, it is for the sake of others. *They* are to be *for* others, at the very core of who they are.

² Even though I've mainly been talking about the salt part of Jesus' proclamation here, we of course could say much the same about light: by and large, we do not put lamps and lighting fixtures somewhere because we like to stare into light bulbs, but because the light they give off is useful and necessary for something else.

After all, through the whole of the Biblical story, God's people are always blessed *in order to be a blessing*. Back in the very beginning, when God first called old father Abraham to be the ancestor of the particular people God would work through: as God was blessing Abraham, God promised that Abraham's name would be made great, "so that you will *be a blessing*", and that "in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And on down through the ages... The people of Israel—*blessed*. The poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers—*blessed*. Those who would follow Jesus—*blessed*. Blessed, yes, but *always* blessed *to be a blessing*.

And we, Church, are the ones sitting at Jesus' feet today, being declared by him salt and light. Our whole purpose, our whole reason for existence, is to preserve and sustain not ourselves but the world—to be a life-giving presence for all of God's children. In just a few minutes, we will share once again in that life-sustaining action that defines us as church, as we are all invited by Christ to come and be fed at the table that God has set for us, the feast of Holy Communion. But this invitation to be fed, this call to be food for the world extends far beyond the walls of this building and the wires that carry our livestream.

We are the salt of the earth, Church, and we have been created to sustain and care for the outcasts of this world—it's why we exist. We feed the hungry, welcome the refugee, and protect the abused—that is our purpose. We are the salt of the earth, Church, and Christ has set us apart to preserve and restore the broken relationships of the world, to do the hard work of reconciliation, to bring about healing and wholeness amidst the brokenness and woundedness we see all around us, to be restorers of God's righteousness and agents of God's mercy.

The world hungers and yearns all around us, my friends, and what we have and who we are, Church—it is *essential* for the life of this world. So let's get out there and get a little salt into the feast God is baking up all around us.

Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.