

**Pastor Mollie's Sermon**  
**February 9, 2020**  
**Matthew 5:13-20**

Growing up, my dad was the cook in our family.

He made everything from breaded porkchops, to potroasts on Sunday evenings, our lunches for school everyday...

But one of my all time favorites... many people's favorites....

Is my dad's chicken pasta salad!

We even had him make it on our wedding day, so Dave and I would have something to come back to in our room, knowing we would be famished and want to eat something delicious.

Now, many have tried to replicate this chicken pasta salad...

But no one can do it like my dad.

The problem when it comes to my dad and his recipes...

Is that there aren't any....

My dad is what they call a dumper...

No measuring takes place...

Even though my dad did finally reveal to me a few of his secrets when making this chicken pasta salad...

When it comes to my dad's cooking, I had to learn — or, rather, my *mouth* had to learn — “how to check for salt.”

Too *little* salt, and the pasta salad would remain bland and lifeless, all of its potential zest and kick subdued.

Too *much* salt, and it would lose its depth and complexity to a sharp, unbearable bitterness.

In our Gospel reading for this week, Jesus says,

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the 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.”

Living as most of us do in cultures of plenty, we take household goods like salt for granted.

But as Mark Kurlansky writes in his book, *Salt: A World History*, “from the beginning of civilization until about one hundred years ago,

salt was one of the most sought after commodities in human history.”

The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits.

Religious covenants were often sealed with salt.

Salt was used for medicinal purposes, to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, stimulate thirst, and treat skin diseases.

Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt — hence our English word, “salary.”

And of course, in all the centuries before refrigeration, salt was essential for food preservation.

Nowadays, we still use salt for all sorts of purposes.

Salt accentuates flavors, melts ice, softens water, and hastens a boil.

It soothes sore throats, rinses sinuses, eases swelling, and cleanses wounds.

In some contexts, salt has more than a flavor; it has an edge. It stings, burns, and irritates.

If we don't have enough salt in our bodies, we die.

But if we have too much? We also die.

No single descriptor from Scripture — salt, light, bride, clay, sheep, branch, dove, soil — will capture or contain the entirety of what it means to live as followers of Christ.

But when Jesus calls his listeners “the salt of the earth,” he is saying something profound, something we’ll miss in our 21st century context unless we press in and pay attention. First of all, he is telling us who we are.

We *are* salt.

We are not “supposed to be” salt, or “encouraged to become” salt, or promised that “if we become” salt, God will love us more.

The language Jesus uses is 100% descriptive; it’s a statement of our identity.

For better or for worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters.

It matters *a lot*.

Whether we want to or not, whether we notice or not, whether we’re intentional about it or not, we spiritually impact the world we live in.

Secondly, we are precious.

Again, it’s easy to miss the import of this in our modern world where salt is cheap and plentiful, but imagine what Jesus’s *first* followers would have heard when he called them salt.

Remember who they were.

Remember what sorts of people Jesus addressed in his famous Sermon on the Mount.

The poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted.

The hungry, the sick, the crippled, the frightened.

The outcast, the misfit, the demon-possessed.

“*You*,” he told them all.

“*You are the salt of the earth.*”

You who are not cleaned up and shiny and well-fed and fashionable, you who’ve been rejected, wounded, unloved, and forgotten —

you are essential. You are worthwhile. You are treasured.

And I am commissioning *you*.

For all of us who’ve spent months or years trying to earn divine favor, believing that our piety might someday make us precious in God’s eyes,

I hope this metaphor will stop us in our tracks.

Jesus knowingly named a commodity that was priceless in his time and place.

He conferred great value on those who did not consider themselves valuable.

He is still doing this. For us. Now.

Thirdly, salt does its best work when it’s poured out.

When it’s scattered.

When it dissolves into what is around it.

I would have done my dad’s chicken pasta salad no favors if I’d kept our salt shaker locked in a kitchen cabinet.

Salt isn’t meant to cluster.

It’s meant to give of itself.

It’s meant to share its unique flavor in order to bring out the best in all that surrounds it.

Which means that if we want to enhance, deepen, and preserve the world we live in,

We must not hide within the walls of our church, our homes, our safe communities.

We must not cluster and congregate simply for our own comfort.

We must not retreat into our theological bubbles out of fear or shame.

Salt doesn't exist to preserve itself;  
it exists to preserve what is *not* itself.  
Remember — we *are* salt.  
It's not a question of striving to become what we are not.  
It's a question of living into the precious fullness of what we already are.  
Lastly, salt is meant to enhance, not dominate.  
Christian saltiness heals; it doesn't wound.  
It softens; it doesn't destroy.  
One of the great tragedies of historic Christianity has been its failure to understand this distinction.  
Salt *fails* when it dominates.  
Instead of eliciting goodness, it destroys the rich potential all around it.  
Salt poured out without discretion leaves a burnt, bitter sensation in its wake.  
It can ruin what it tries to enhance.  
This, unfortunately, is a reputation Christianity has all-too-often these days.  
We can be known as the salt that exacerbates wounds and irritates souls.  
We can be considered arrogant, domineering, and uninterested in enhancing anything but ourselves.  
Some may view Christianity for being known for hoarding power — not for giving it away...known for shaming, not blessing....known for using our words to burn, not heal.  
This is not what Jesus ever intended when he called us the salt of the earth.  
Our preciousness was never meant to make us proud and self-righteous; it was meant to humble and awe us.  
So what do we do?  
Our vocation in these times and places is not to lose our saltiness.  
That's the temptation — to retreat. To hide.  
To choose blandness instead of boldness.  
To keep our love for Jesus a hushed and embarrassed secret.  
But that kind of salt, Jesus told his listeners, is useless.  
It is untrue to its very essence.  
And so we are called to live wisely, creatively, and in balance.  
To learn — as my dad has taught me — “how to check for salt.”  
Salt at its best sustains and enriches life.  
It pours itself out with discretion so that God's kingdom might be known on the earth —  
a kingdom of spice and zest, a kingdom of health and wholeness, a kingdom of varied depth,  
flavor, and complexity.  
In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes concrete the work of love, compassion, healing, and justice.  
To be blessed, to be salt, to be followers of Jesus, is to take seriously what our identity signifies.  
We are the salt of the earth. That is what *we are*, for better or for worse. May it be for better.  
May your pouring out — and mine — be for the life of the world. AMEN