

Epiphany 5
St. Matthew 5:13-20
February 5th, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Salt

"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."

I am a saltaholic. It's a wonder I haven't turned into a pillar of salt like Lot's wife. I love the spice in and on my food. Maybe it is because I used to be a smoker years ago and ruined my taste buds. Salt can make bland food palatable. Salt can hide the bad taste of some food underlying its saltiness, making us ignore the flaws in our food. This is why fast food chains flourish.

Salt can preserve food. Fishermen used to dry out and salt codfish on the shores of New England. Salt is used in dehydrating and drying and preserving beef slices to make beef jerky.

Our bodies need salt in the heat of summer for proper mineral balance and hydration, even with minimal outdoor activity and certainly with any athletic exertion.

Salt is a very common element and is found in seawater all over the planet, so much so it makes it undrinkable for human beings. *"Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink!"*

Salt is thought of as common, but food without salt would be

considered common and with it, uncommonly good. Its savory quality makes us desire more of the food laced with it. This is why you can't eat just one Lay's potato chip.

When I was young, there were about two brands of salt in the grocery store. The store brand and Morton's salt. A container cost about 10 cents in those days, and is now about \$2.00. It came in raw and "Iodized" types. Not a lot of choice. Today, the number of choices fills up several shelves in the spice aisle. There is pink salt, glacial salt, kosher salt, sea salt, blue salt, bar salt, and so on. You get the picture: lots of choices. Salt is no longer just common and plain. There is even a whole shelf of salt substitutes, but most of those leave something lacking and are only good if you have to use them in lieu of the real thing.

Salt can be overused. It can effect blood pressure in some people, by causing it to rise. Others can dump it on their food to no effect. And again, there is the harm that would come to you if you were thirsty while drifting in a lifeboat and drank salt water out at sea. Why? Because it would dehydrate you, just like the beef jerky, causing you to lose more water than you drank over time. We have yet to invent a cost effective way to desalinate seawater for mass use, though some ships and submarines do it.

Salt was used as a currency in the Middle East, which transcend boundaries and cultures because of its universal appeal, hence value and it was traded regularly in the market for goods. It is the source of the word "*salary*" in our language.

Salt in Rabbinic literature of this period was a metaphor for *wisdom*. It would make sense to say Christians were salt as they possessed the wisdom of God, which was folly to men.

Just as in our own time, the wisdom of God does not always coincide and coalesce with the wisdom of our materialistic culture, which sometimes elevates things and money over people.

Salt was also an important religious and spiritual symbol. It is used as a symbol of purity in making Holy Water. It is also sprinkled during the real ceremony of Exorcism to ward off evil.

Salt and a broom were the two gifts you were supposed to present to a new homeowner. Salt for purity and the broom to sweep away evil from the home.

Why do people throw salt over their shoulders? Well, if you spill the salt, you are supposed to, so the tale goes. This superstition dates to portrayals of the last supper, in which Judas Iscariot tips over the salt with his elbow, signifying his treachery and coming betrayal. It has been seen ever since as an evil omen. Hence, when you spill salt, signifying the omen of evil, you are to cast a pinch of salt over your shoulder to get into the eyes of the devil who is lurking behind you.

I don't know about salt losing its taste, but we do put it underfoot at this time of the year to melt snow and make roadways passable. This is even helpful, protecting us from slipping and falling, or skidding in our vehicles and having accidents.

Salt has also been used for centuries on roadways to keep down *dust*. Spreading salt on a roadway attracts moisture, which bonds to the salt and holds down dust. It is likely this use was a common one in first century Middle Eastern countries, especially in the land of Israel. So salt, which was

not as refined as the salt which was used in cooking, might be thrown underfoot to control dust. There was no lack of salt supply close by in the Dead Sea and its surrounds.

I can't imagine salt losing its taste, because sodium chloride [NaCl] is an extremely stable element. Biblical Scholars have observed that the salt used in Jesus' day was not very pure from the way it was mined and collected and it contained other elements, and if exposed to moisture, could lose its saltiness because the sodium chloride would be washed out of the coarse elements which were in the salt used in the kitchen. When moisture did this, and washed the saltiness out of the substance, often a white powder was left behind which was not salty at all, and would be cast out into the street to be trodden under foot by other people. This was actually the other elements and substances collected with the salts, and which were left behind when the salt was washed out of them.

Now there's an image. Dilute our saltiness to the point where we lose our salty taste, and we may as well get tossed out into the street with the other refuse from our life. Indeed, Jesus is right when he questions how the saltiness can be restored to these elements left behind. As he observes, this refuse is no longer good for anything. I hope I would never lose my salt and be subject to such a harsh judgment.

How do we dilute our saltiness to the point where we no longer possess the salty character we once had? Sin is a powerful liquid used in this process. Selfishness and self-centeredness are two other liquids used to dilute it.

Can saltiness be restored after a good long bath in these liquids?

I guess it is more important to retain your saltiness. Saltiness may begin in Godly wisdom, but it is the spice of life, that which gives good and sometimes great taste to everything it touches. Consider how it works for you as a spiritual metaphor:

- Salt is common, humble, with no pretensions, yet without it, life would be too plain. Ever notice those around you who give that spice to your life?
- Salt keeps you from slipping
- Salt does not change. It cannot lose its essential property, even though we suppose it to be hidden.
- Salt controls the dust in life, allowing us to walk on those dusty paths
- Salt prevents us from losing our balance when we venture out in the cold.
- Salt is more valuable than most commodities on earth, perhaps it is beyond any price... when others recognize its value and respect its contribution to life in this world.
- As some throw salt over their shoulders to thwart evil, salty people protect us from evil by showing us the good, by being soldiers for good.

One of the highest compliments you can pay someone is to call them '*the salt of the earth.*' You the people of this parish church are the salt of the earth! That is the character of the folks who make up St. George's.

We should all aspire to be given this compliment and we should seek to be this spice as we go about our daily business in life. How would you describe someone who is the salt of the earth? Who is salting your life? What lives have you salted lately?
AMEN

