

38"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

39"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40for whoever is not against us is for us. 41I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

42"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. 43If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. 44And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 45And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 46where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' 47Everyone will be salted with fire.

50"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

I've never understood the whole "salt of the earth" thing, as if being the salt of the earth was a good thing. I grew up in a family plagued by high blood pressure and salt was not a good thing. But our family was also Christian and Jesus says to "have salt in yourselves" and not to lose your saltiness . . . , well, what's a girl to? Up until this week, I did nothing with it, avoiding the conundrum altogether. I've never preached on these passages and I never say, "Oh, they're salt of the earth kind of folk" because I don't really know what it means. But this week I began asking people what "salt of the earth" meant to them. And they responded how you might expect—"Good folks." "Just decent people, people who do good things." "Church folks who help out." "Practical people, not all fancy." And while these definitions were fine and good, they didn't seem to me to be exactly what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was an edgy guy, he pushed the envelope, questioned the status quo, needled the authorities. It seems to me that he would ask more of us than simply to be decent, practical, and go to church. Should we do and be that, of course. But is that all Jesus asks of us, I don't think so.

So when he calls us to be the "salt of the earth", what exactly does he mean? To find out, we need to turn to the culture of Jesus' day. First of all, Jesus was a Jew preaching to a group of Jews and so we ask ourselves, "What did salt mean in an ancient Jewish context?" In the Old Testament books of Exodus, Ezekiel, and Kings, salt is used as a purifying agent. In Leviticus, Numbers, and Chronicles salt is a sign of God's covenant. Throughout scripture, salt was used as a preservative. So while the closest thing I could come to for a *modern day* definition of "salt of the earth" was "someone who is humble and lacking pretension", the ancient meaning, the meaning for Jesus and his listeners, would, indeed have been quite different and for us to fully appreciate this text, we need to get to the meaning that Jesus intended.

For Jesus, to be "salt of the earth" likely meant that followers of him were to be for humanity what salt was for the Jewish faith; first, we are to be purifying agents. At the time Jesus spoke these words, there were salt merchants. Some of these salt merchants were less than, well, "salt of the earth" kind of people and were known to cheat their customers by adding sand to the salt causing the salt to "lose its saltiness." Now, if you are a chemist, you know that it is impossible for salt to lose its saltiness. Salt isn't like some spices that lose their taste over time. Salt stays salty—unless, it is impure. When Jesus talks about people losing their saltiness, he is talking about people who become impure, corrupted by powers of evil in the world. In Jesus' case, he may have been speaking of some of the Pharisees who had succumbed to the powers of greed; the message of God's generosity and compassion they were supposed to be preaching, the salt they were supposed to be sprinkling, had become impure, tainted by sands hypocrisy.

In Jesus' time, in addition to being a purifying agent, salt was a symbol of God's covenant with Israel. Do you remember it—"If you will be my people, I will be your God." Just as a wedding ring is a symbol of the covenant between the partners in a marriage, salt was a symbol of the covenant between God and God's people. With Noah God used a rainbow, with the Israelites, salt. And, with that being the case, when Jesus said that his

followers ought to retain their saltiness, he likely also meant that, in addition to resisting the evil powers in the world that make us impure, we also need to be, as salt is, symbols of the covenant between God and God's people. Namely, that we need to keep up our end of the bargain to let God be God. Now that sounds like good sense, but in the lives of Jesus' first listeners, and in ours, it can be awfully hard, can't it? Don't we, after all, so often want to be our own God? We want to do what we want when we want. We want power and influence. We want control, to be the leading character in the movie that is our life. We want to think that our abilities and intelligence come from our own hard-work and know how. But God, God wants something else. God wants us to allow God to be God. God wants us to understand that God is in control—not us. God wants us to acknowledge God as the fount of every blessing. God just wants to be our God and when we retain our saltiness, we retain our identity as a child of, not an equal to, God. When we realize that we are children of God, we know that the salt we use to flavor our world comes not from our own selves, but rather that we are just the shakers, God is the salt, and calls us to be the shakers of that salt, calls us to flavor the world with God's justice and compassion, and become for others a symbol of what it means to follow Jesus, to allow God to be our God. We do this by acknowledging God as the source of all our blessings and offering God our praise and thanks through the giving of our time, talent, and treasure and thus we are a symbol of God's covenant.

And finally, in addition to being a purifier and a symbol of covenant, salt was used as a preservative. We use preservatives, like sulfites, in wine or, in the case of boats and airplanes, we use preservers for people. Preservers preserve life. And Jesus likely meant no less than this for us—we are to preserve life. In the Book of Proverbs, scripture tell us that “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” To perish is to lose life. Therefore, according to Biblical wisdom, to preserve life is to have a vision. Indeed, we are preservatives of life when we keep the vision God has set out before us. Now let me repeat that—we are preservatives of life when we keep the vision GOD has set out before us. We had very productive brainstorming sessions in our Vision Process last week and I trust that God was at work in you and through you. I pray that God continues to grant us a vision to preserve, a vision of life as God would have us live it, a vision that, as God's salt shakers on earth, we can share with others as we seek to flavor the world with tastes of the kingdom of God.

And what might that vision look like, what might the kingdom of God taste like? I think many of you began to name it during your Vision Area Teams. For some of you, the kingdom of God tastes like, indeed the vision of God you wish to preserve and share with the world is of a church that provides more programs and staff for our youth, increases our efforts to invite new people to church, includes youth in our committee structure and other ministries of the church, becomes more involved with the schools and other community organizations, helps members of the congregation determine what spiritual gifts they have been given for the purposes of building up the kingdom—in other words, to help them know the best place to shake the salt God's given them. You seek to flavor the world with the salt of God with a church that is handicap accesible and let's all God's children have a place here, provides respite care for caregivers and mothers of young children, finds new ways to welcome those from other religious backgrounds (just because they're salt is idodized doesn't mean it isn't welcome here), finds more opportunities to praise and worship God as a church family, uses our physical resources to serve not just our church, but the wider community, engages other churches in ecumenical gatherings, expands our inspiring music ministry, shares individual stories of faith and transformation, utilizes the internet and other technologies to connect people to each other and the church, visits with those who are shut-in and ill, supports mission partners and particpates in mission opportunities, takes time to get to know one another, provides safe haven for those in need, and communicates effectively with friends, neighbors, and the wider community. This is by no means an exhaustive list—but rather points to the general themes that came up in last week's vision process—the general directions in which you are wanting to move so that we can truly be “salt of the earth”—people who seek to stay **pure** from the evil forces in the world, people whose lives **symbolize** the covenant God has with God's people, and people who live to **preserve** God's vision for the world for surely without this vision, the people, we the people, will perish.

Thanks be to God for the vision. Thanks be to God for you, the salt of the earth—the shakers who flavor the world with tastes of the kingdom. Thanks be to God.