

Epiphany 5 Year A 2011

Jesus is using salt in the Gospel this morning to describe what it is that we are called to be. What is it? He says, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" Good old Sodium chloride – salt – has gotten a particularly bad reputation in recent decades. Even though humans require a certain amount of salt for survival, most of us take in too much, and ingesting excessive amounts has been linked to major health problems. Individuals who eat too much salt are at a risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and even stomach cancer.

Those trying to eat healthy quickly learn the need to limit daily salt intake to an amount equal to one teaspoonful, including all that is contained in food itself prior to whatever we pour out of a shaker. They also discover that salt can be found in over-supply in cheese, butter, margarine, snack food, breakfast cereals, canned goods, soy sauce, and processed foods. It is used in many foods as a color additive, a binder, an element for giving texture, and a control agent in making bread.

And salt is very inexpensive in our culture. In addition to small amounts of salt for the table, we buy it in 40 pound bags for use in water softeners or on slick winter sidewalks and by the dump-truck load to melt ice on roads and bridges.

Of course, the way in which modern people view salt – abundant everywhere – is decidedly different from those of centuries ago. As both a seasoning and a preservative, salt was a necessity in the ancient world and an extremely valuable commodity. Roman soldiers received a salt ration, called the *salarium*. And guess what... from a salt ration called the *salarium* comes our ever important English word. Something we couldn't live without... and that word is "salary." Imagine being paid your wages or your retirement benefits in salt.

Because in Biblical times salt was rare, hard to obtain, and considered a very precious commodity, we can better understand why Jesus used the image in today's gospel story: "You are the salt of the earth."

Jesus used an analogy that the people of his day could easily understand and he used it to let them know that he expected something extraordinary from them for the sake of God. He placed a high value on them and on what he required of them – just as the first-century culture placed a very high value on salt. He taught his followers to act for God in ways as important and varied as salt was in their world.

Our being salt to the world would help others learn to make life special.... Christian faith can provide spiritual seasoning that gives life joy and meaning. To keep life from being bland and unrewarding, we season it with Christian commitment and understanding of God's love for his children. Being salt to the world means adding flavor to life wherever and whenever possible. It means adding a zestful spirit to life and love. It means pursuing meaning in all we do and in all we encounter. It means acting in love with all whom we touch.

In Jesus' day, salt was often connected with purity. The Romans believed that salt was the purest of all things, because it came from pure things: the sun and the sea. It was used by the Jews to purify their offerings to God. If we modern Christians are to be the salt of the earth, we must accept a pure and high standard in speech, thought, and behavior – keeping ourselves unspotted by the world's self-centeredness. Jesus calls us to be a cleansing presence, constantly witnessing to the good that is found in God and the values of God's realm.

In ancient times, salt was valued as a basic ingredient of a good life. As salt in the world, we can serve as a basic nutrient for others. We can become nurturing agents for those around us – caring, helping, enriching, teaching, and bringing Christ into their lives.

Salt was also used to aid healing. As salt in the world we can promote healing through prayer, caring for others, and supporting the least, the lost, and the lonely – holding hands with one another and administering the holy oil of anointing.

We could do well also to make an application from the use of salt to thaw ice on roads. As salt in the world, we can help melt the iciness of life. Frozen relationships can be melted by applying the warmth of Christian love. We can take that love and wear down the indifference or lack of feeling that often overtakes human beings.

Salt has, for centuries, served as a preservative to prevent food from spoiling. If we, as salt in the world, become preservatives of God's goodness, we can help prevent spoiling and corruption wherever we find it. As followers of Jesus, we are committed to preserving Christian principles that keep ourselves and others from going bad.

It might be instructive to note something Jesus did not say. He did not tell his disciples to become the "pepper of the earth." Pepper calls attention to itself, as opposed to salt that, when properly used, only highlights what it flavors. Jesus does not expect us to call attention to ourselves in our salting efforts. Rather, we are to make others more acceptable, more meaningful, more loving.

Sometimes salt is discovered in domes or dried from the waters of the ocean as well as being found in boxes in our pantries or shakers on our dining-room tables. For the salt to become effective, to do its work, however, it must be released from its container. God can release us from what entraps us so we can truly salt the people of the earth.

God can release us to do the work Jesus commands us to do – to make a difference in the world: giving hope where there is no hope; forgiving where there is sin; embracing where there is loneliness and despair; tolerating where there is prejudice; reconciling where there is

conflict; bringing justice where there is wrong; providing food where there is hunger; giving comfort where there is distress or disease.

Jesus empowers us to purify, to heal, to nurture, to thaw the frozen, to preserve, and to season the people of the earth. The power of God supports and sustains us and stands with us if we risk whatever it takes to become salt to the world. And when we fail in this effort, God will raise us up and renew us and give us strength to persevere, again and again.

Unlike many modern people whose health depends on moderation in eating sodium, we “salty” Christians do not need to go on a spiritual salt-free diet. Let us rather become the salt of the earth. Let us reach out to our communities in a world in desperate need of what Christian seasoning can provide. As Christians, let us remain pure and committed and let us accept the responsibility to help make ourselves and others a people more and more in keeping with the values of God. The power of God supports and sustains us and stands with us if we risk whatever it takes to become salt to the world. Amen.

Kesselus

Excerpted from The Rev. Ken