

SALT OF THE EARTH

A very strange thing happened as I was preparing for this PWS&D service. I went to the PCC website to see the material they had to offer for the service and discovered that the same text as I had chosen to reflect on for my message in the annual report to the congregation is the one that they had prepared a sermon for! It is all about salt – about being salty – about adding flavour and preventing decay – about invisibly bringing out the best – about hospitality and community.

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.

Everyday, common salt – what an odd thing to call the disciples!

We put salt in our food – or not, if we have high blood pressure.

We spread it on our icy roads and sidewalks and then complain about it staining our boots, coating our cars and polluting our fresh water lakes.

We use it, but we don't really give much thought to salt, it is so common, so available.

But if salt is common, it certainly is not unimportant.

In ancient times, salt was considered so valuable that it was used as currency – that's where we get the word *salary* – originally meaning *soldier's salt-money*.

Salt was a necessity of life in biblical times. Used as a condiment and a preservative, it was also part of the sacrificial rituals of the Temple. Salt was used with cereal offerings, burnt offerings and incense in the prayers offered to God.

Because salt has always been important to eating, it became a symbol of hospitality. To *eat salt* or *share the salt* with a person was to enjoy table companionship and to forge an unbreakable bond with that person, giving rise in the Book of Numbers and Second Chronicles to the expression a *covenant of salt*.

We know that salt can make quite a difference. It has a special ability to permeate and penetrate. It flavours food, keeps things from going bad, helps to clean things. People who exercise vigorously need to make sure when they drink lots of water that they do not deplete the salts in their system.

So when Jesus calls his disciples *salt of the earth*, he is not giving them a compliment the way we use that phrase about people who are particularly fine people. He is telling them what a disciple of the kingdom of God is like.

First, Jesus' disciples are to "flavour" the world with the values of God's reign: justice, love, peace, compassion.

Second, they are to preserve human life and prevent decay in society.

Third, they are to work quietly – even invisibly – to bring out the best in humanity.

Fourth, they are to embody the companionship and hospitality that salt represents.

And finally, disciples are not to live in isolation from the world. Salt is never complete in itself. It is an ingredient in a greater whole. Its job is to be mingled with – to be lost in – to affect other things.

In calling his disciples *salt*, Jesus is saying what the prophets said time and again to Israel: that faith in God is real only when it is lived out in society and in the context of the whole creation. The covenant with God includes our connectedness with our human brothers and sisters. As we hear in Isaiah 58, we cannot worship God and at the same time pursue our own interests, oppress workers, quarrel and fight. Sharing food with the hungry, removing the chains of oppression – these are as important as prayer in the worship of God.

The late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador came to his position in the 1970s as one comfortable with the ruling class and somewhat conservative in his vision of the church. But he could not remain blind to the terrible oppression of poor peasants, teachers, community workers, and priests who were struggling for basic necessities such as clean water, decent housing, education and health care. Gradually, Romero became an outspoken, courageous and beloved leader of the people as he tried to convince the government and its military to stop the torturing and killings of farmers, workers, and priests. He himself then became a threat to the small but powerful ruling elite and was assassinated by one of the death squads in March of 1980 while celebrating Mass. On his death, he became an even more powerful symbol for the people working for freedom.

Archbishop Romero encouraged Christians in his country, as the Church, to be salt in the midst of their great suffering, giving flavour and remaining deeply committed even while surrounded by the threat of death.

Many Salvadoran Christians truly became *salt of the earth*, giving the flavour of faithfulness, compassion and sanity in the midst of insane cruelty of the 1970s and '80s, trying to prevent the decay of human life into greed and destruction.

It is the quality of saltiness that gives salt its identity and purpose.

So the quality of faithfulness to Jesus, even under hardship, gives disciples identity and purpose. Jesus knew that following him would not be easy and might well bring suffering and persecution to his followers. It would be tempting to slacken in one's discipleship and to go along with the ways of the world for safety's sake.

But Jesus likens this to salt losing its saltiness – an impossibility, really. So it is impossible for disciples to lose commitment to the way of love and justice and still be disciples. If society's pressure or persecution causes the *salt of the earth* to lose *saltiness*, they are of no more use as disciples. On the other hand, through the disciples' good works, God's love and goodness are revealed and the persecutors or scorners may change their ways and glorify God.

In a little study book written in 1963 called *Salty Christians* by Hans-Ruedi Weber, a minister of the Swiss Reformed Church involved in lay education, wrote: "It has been said that every Christian needs a double conversion: conversion from the world to Christ, and conversion to service with Christ in the world – to 'holy worldliness.'" This understanding of the Christian life

can lead us to become *the salt of the earth* – salty Christians, who share in Christ’s ministry to the world, with all the people of God. . . . [*Salty Christians* by Hans-Ruedi Weber, p. 49]

Conversion from the world to Christ, and conversion to service with Christ in the world.

“True Christians are contagiously human,” writes Hans-Ruedi Weber. [ibid. p. 48] To be contagiously human, to share the truly human life that Christ exemplifies and lifts up, is to leave behind pride, exclusiveness, jealousy, self-righteousness. It is to give up blandness and boredom and longing for the good old days. It is to take risks – to move forward with excitement following where the Risen Christ leads – to see others with compassion and welcome them in love – to share hope – *to loose the bonds of injustice – to share bread with the hungry* – to be *worth our salt – salty Christians – salt of the earth* – permeating the world with the love and hope of Christ.

To be *salt of the earth* is sometimes a daunting calling given the breadth and depth of suffering in the world. But the good news is that change for the better is happening by God’s grace. And we are participants in that transformation. Through the ongoing work of our church through Presbyterian World Service & Development, we work like salt with global partners to improve the flavour of life for many people in many ways.

Through our support, and the faithful work of staff and partners worldwide:

- communities are learning how to increase crop yields for more nutrition and food
- women are being empowered to start small businesses and improve their families’ livelihoods
- health care programs ensure children are able to begin life with a better chance of survival
- vulnerable children are receiving an education
- people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS are being cared for and supported
- injustices are being combated through a shared commitment to human rights
- communities are accessing clean water through programs of digging wells and teaching proper sanitation
- refugees to Canada are rebuilding their lives through support from Canadian congregations
- emergency relief is provided in times of disaster, such as in Haiti and Chile.

Change is happening by the Spirit-led generosity and compassion of Presbyterians in Canada and our sisters and brothers in Christ, both here in our communities at home and around the world. We are *the salt of the earth*. We are not isolated, individual grains of salt. *Salty Christians* cannot and do not go it alone. We share in Christ’s ministry to the world with all the people of God, from other places, other communions and denominations. God is able to accomplish within and among us things beyond our imagining. Properly seasoned by God’s loving purpose, we discover gladly the surprising ways in which God is leading us and the world into wholeness and new life.

Thanks be to God!

Today’s message is from material prepared by PWS&D and written by The Rev. Iona MacLean, First Presbyterian Church in Pictou, Nova Scotia. This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh