

Please Pass the Salt Sunday, 6/7/20

[OFF] Next week we'll be hearing from and praying for our graduating high school seniors. So now that school is out, let's see what you remember from your high school chemistry class. Seniors, do you remember what compound is formed when you combine the base of Sodium Hydroxide with Hydrochloric Acid?¹ I'll give you a hint- it's an important part of making almost everything you eat taste better. The answer: Sodium Chloride, otherwise known as salt. Salt has been an important part of how we eat for thousands of years.²

[SHARE: No Salt Ketchup] But in 2020, S-A-L-T has become a four-letter word. Americans are getting too much salt in our diets, which is wreaking havoc with our hearts. Just one cup of PF Chang's Hot and Sour Soup contains almost 8,000 milligrams of sodium, which is more than double what the CDC offers for the recommended average daily allowance of 3,400 milligrams per day³ and more sodium than six Big Mac Meals combined!⁴ And so the most sacred of American condiments, ketchup, is now offered in a "no-salt added" variety. By the way, I've tried the "no salt" ketchup- don't bother. It's awful.

But the salt-rich diet of processed American food and our high blood pressure isn't exactly what Jesus had in mind when he told us that we are "the salt of the earth." Let's take a look at our Gospel reading for this morning and see if we can't unravel what Jesus is saying to us. I'm reading from the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, starting with verse 13.

[SHARE: Second Scripture Image] {Read Matthew 5:13-16, NLT}

[SHARE: Salt Ponds] According to my son the chemical engineer, salt is one of the least interesting compounds in chemistry. It's also one of the most common. According to one estimate, there's "about 50 quintillion kilograms...of salt in the ocean. Its mass is almost the same as that of the moon!"⁵ That's a seriously large amount of salt!

¹ <https://cnx.org/contents/ss65A4q-@2.1:JIIdP4X2@1/Acid-base-reactions>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salt#History>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/salt/pdfs/sodium_dietary_guidelines.pdf

⁴ <https://www.livestrong.com/article/312522-how-many-calories-are-in-a-big-mac-meal/>

⁵ <https://scripps.ucsd.edu/news/what-makes-ocean-salty-and-how-much-salt-ocean>

Most salt comes from evaporation ponds like these near San Francisco, or from salt mines. It seems like an awful lot of work to go through for something we can buy just about anywhere for less than a dollar per pound. So, when Jesus calls us the Salt of the World, does he mean that we're cheap and common place, something that causes high blood pressure that the world would be better off without? Hardly.

[OFF] What Jesus has in mind in Matthew 5 is rather simple and specific. The world needs more salt, says Jesus, in the same way the world needs more light. We are to be salt and light in the sense that other people will notice our presence. We are supposed to stand out in the crowd. We are to be Holy, set apart in this world but not of this world. For Christians to not be salty would be as inconceivable as lighting a lamp and then hiding it under a bowl. And the reason, and the way, we are to stand out in the crowd is given right at the end of Matthew 5:16: “[L]et your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” Christians are supposed to be noticed in order that God is noticed.

[SHARE: Coffee] So what does it mean to be salty? I don't personally find random acts of kindness to be very salty. Don't get me wrong, I really like receiving random acts of kindness. Who wouldn't enjoy going through the Caribou drive-through and having the person in the car ahead pay for their coffee? I also like practicing random acts of kindness, because they allow me to feel like I'm loving my neighbor with relatively little effort, and certainly without the hard work of actually being in relationship with them, without committing to an ongoing responsibility, and without the awkwardness of having to explain that the reason I'm able and willing to bless them is because Jesus first blessed me. Random acts of kindness make me feel good, but they often don't do a very good job of accomplishing what Jesus had in mind: “that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” Even something so obviously good as handing out canned goods to the poor can lose its saltiness if we fail to season the gift of the food with a gracious pointing to the love of Christ.

[OFF] Secret gifts of compassion to those in need are also not as salty as they could

be. We say we want to protect our own humility and the dignity of those receiving the gifts, but I suspect that sometimes what we're really doing is bypassing the difficult and awkward work of actually meeting those people in their uncomfortable circumstances. It's much easier to deal with someone when you only know them as a size 10, rather than encountering the whole person, painful realities and all. Please do continue to give to those in need. But I wonder if there's a way to be saltier about the way we express our compassion. I wonder if we can be a city on a hill rather than an underground bunker, "that everyone will praise [our] heavenly Father."

[SHARE: Billboard] Do you remember when those billboards were all around, with messages from God? This one is one of my favorites. "That "Love thy neighbor thing...I meant that." Jesus boiled down the entire salty ocean of commandments to this and one other commandment, so a big part of being the salt of the world is loving our neighbors- not just randomly, not just secretly, but intentionally, regularly, and with everything we've got. But how do we do that during a time of pandemic and race riots? How do we keep the essential flavor of the salt, the present and coming Kingdom of Jesus Christ, when everything about our world is so upside down at the moment?

[OFF] Salty people are the reason I'm a Christian. When I was younger, all the clever arguments in the world couldn't convince me of the claims of Christ. It took meeting a church full of salty people to get my attention before I was willing to allow God's Spirit to begin to melt my heart of stone. I was able to connect the actions and attitudes of Christians around me with the love of God. And that's what convinced me to believe the good news of Jesus. That "love thy neighbor thing" isn't just about being do-gooders. It's about pointing people to the present and coming kingdom of Christ, so that they will praise our Father in Heaven. For me, that happened by walking through the doors of a church. These days, there aren't many people physically doing that. So where does that leave us, beyond our weekly recorded worship services?

[SHARE: Fence] I hope you're not having long, close-up conversations with your neighbors over the fence yet, but there are relatively safe ways to talk with your neighbors, outdoors, wearing masks and physically distant, limiting the amount of time in conversation and group size. Our families, friends, and neighbor networks are the original bridges of God

that were used to build the church. Perhaps this is a time when the low-tech approach to sharing a salty conversation with a neighbor could actually be effective and well-received.

[SHARE: Article] Last week I shared this article on Facebook, suggesting seventy-five constructive actions white people can take to advance the cause of racial justice in this country during this time of collective grief and anger. Standing against injustice of all kinds is not only one of our membership vows as United Methodists, it's also the kind of salty Christianity the world is longing to see. Make good use of your Facebook, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, not just to be entertained, but to share the Good News of Jesus in supportive, loving ways. And guess what: those smart phones we all have in our pockets? They still make phone calls, so why not call one of the people in your social network and offer a word of encouragement in the name of Jesus?

[OFF] But what if the salt has lost its flavor? How can we get saltier? After all, there's no sense sharing salt with the world if the salt is no longer salty. The solution to that problem is both incredibly simple, and impossibly hard. It's so obvious, yet seemingly so difficult for us as a people with so many shortcomings, flaws, and failures. In fact, Jesus said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible."⁶

Saltiness isn't a program, an institution, a method, or something for sale. It isn't something we can create for ourselves or get better at by trying harder. Saltiness only comes from a lifetime of learning to love God, by hanging around God, by communing with God, by allowing God's Word to shape our hearts, by allowing God's Spirit to shape our choices, and by allowing God's people to form us in community, with our without the current physical contact restrictions.

Saltiness comes from the accumulated experiences of following Jesus, from learning to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit. And the purpose of that saltiness is for us to carry it into our families, our church networks, and our communities, thinking, talking, and acting in strange but flavorful ways, letting our "good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise [our] heavenly Father."

There must be many thousands of individual grains in a pound of table salt. If you're

⁶ Matthew 19:26. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

using that salt to season your food, a pound of salt goes a long way. There are over 2 billion people on this planet who say that they follow Jesus Christ- about 31% of all people.⁷ Shouldn't this be a saltier planet? About 48% of Wright County residents affiliate with a mainstream Christian denomination.⁸ Shouldn't Wright County be saltier? And in our church, where probably more than 95% of the people worshipping with us profess a faith in Jesus, shouldn't we be like one of those concentrated salt ponds, getting saltier by the day? The church, our communities, and the world can become saltier places if we seek to live out our love relationship with God, sharing that love with our neighbors in the name of Christ. May it be so, more and more each day. Amen.

[SHARE: Reflection Slide] Please take a minute now to reflect on how you will be salt and light. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

⁸ <https://www.bestplaces.net/religion/county/minnesota/wright>