

How do you feel about salt? How much do use it? How much do you know about it? Some people try to avoid eating salt to lower their blood pressure. Others know the beach is the only place where salt actually lowers your blood pressure. Mark Kurlansky, who wrote the book, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (a book Cape Codders should probably read) also wrote, *Salt, A World History*. Salt is a common household item with a long and intriguing history. The only rock we eat, salt has shaped civilization from the very beginning, and its story is a surprising part of the history of humankind. A substance so valuable it served as currency, salt influenced the establishment of trade routes and cities, provoked and financed wars, secured empires, and inspired revolutions. From ancient times and especially until the invention of refrigeration, salt was a very valuable and important resource. Right here in Brewster, there was a time when salt works were found all along Cape Cod Bay.

When Jesus wanted to convey to his followers how important they were to the world, how vital it was for them to live as he taught them, and what they needed to do, he used a common rock they were all very familiar with to make his point. Listen to what Jesus says to a large crowd gathered to hear him in *Matthew 5:13-16*, which is part of his message we know as the “Sermon on the Mount.”

“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. **You are the light of the world.** A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after **lighting** a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives **light** to the whole house. In the same way, **let your light shine before others**, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Salt and light are such familiar images that their power to spice up and illuminate communication has perhaps diminished somewhat in the last 2,000 years, but let's take these old favorites off the shelf and see what Jesus is using them to illustrate. **“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”** The first thing to note is the **“you”** here is plural which means it's the faith community as a whole, it's the church not any individual who is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. **When Jesus says you are salt and light, he's talking about the function and the purpose of the church.** Jesus also uses examples of salt and light when they're not fulfilling their proper function, their purpose, their mission. Salt that's lost its taste, salt without saltiness is useless; it's good for nothing except to be thrown away and used to make footpaths for folks to walk on. A lamp that's hidden under a bushel basket is pointless. Why light a lamp if you're not going to let it shine?

If they're functioning properly, salt and light are two entities that have the power to transform everything they touch. Jesus is saying this is the way it should be with his followers; together, if we're functioning properly, we have the power to transform our

neighborhood, our communities and the world. That's an awesome and amazing statement.

What do we know about salt? First of all, salt adds flavor and zest to food it touches. I've mentioned before that when we go to Maine, I look forward to eating Pier Fries in Old Orchard Beach. They have terrific, thick French fries made from Maine potatoes. We usually get the largest size, a box, and you can eat them plain and they're okay, but when you shake some salt on them, they're fabulous. Just ask anyone who has been placed by their doctor on a low salt diet and they'll tell you, salt adds flavor, zest and life to food. **Jesus is saying his followers, the church, are to add zest, spice and flavor to life in the world as we live out kingdom values.**

Now I may be mistaken on this point, but if we played a word association game, I don't know how many people inside or outside the church would associate the word "church" with words like "zesty, exciting, it makes my mouth water just hearing the word 'church.'" Sadly, many people inside and outside the church would describe the nature of the church in exactly the opposite way that Jesus does. They'd say church is bland, boring, tasteless, and doesn't add anything to their lives. The image too many people have of the church is nothing like what Jesus envisioned. Wouldn't it be great for people to say, "I'm a part of Brewster Baptist Church because it adds so much flavor to my life"?

Salt not only adds flavor, zest and life, in Jesus' day before refrigeration **salt was primarily used as a preservative**. Another way the church is like salt is that it's the vessel that will preserve and pass on the teaching and story of Jesus. **"Pass the salt,"** takes on new meaning when we think about the salt as the teaching and story of what God has done for us in Christ. Are you passing the salt, or keeping it to yourself? At a dinner table if someone asked you to pass the salt and you ignored the request or refused to, it would be rude. Jesus commands us to pass the salt, to share the gospel with those around us, and we don't want to share it rudely, but we do want to share the salt of Christ, freely and appropriately. We want to pass it on.

Salt adds flavor, it preserves, and it was also used to purify, to fight against corruption and decay. Another function of the followers of Jesus is to fight against the corruption and decay in the culture around us wherever we find it. Salt purifies and cleanses which is also a function of the church; to help purify and cleanse not only individuals from their sins, but the culture at large and to make it a kinder, more compassionate, holier, more just society.

Salt adds life, preserves, purifies, and those of us in the northeast know one other function of salt that we experience in the winter. Salt is spread in the winter on ice and snow on sidewalks, driveways and roads to melt the ice and **provide better traction**, so folks don't slip and fall or have accidents. In the same way, the function of the church is to keep people from falling and hurting themselves or other people. The church helps people get a grip on life and enables us to move forward with greater assurance and confidence. On the slick sheer ice of

life, we can help provide traction, help folks regain their balance, and provide a stable resting place before folks resume their journey. Salt can melt ice in the same way that the love of God can melt a cold and hardened-heart.

When you think about it, salt is pretty remarkable; but before we get to feeling too good about ourselves since Jesus says we're the salt of the earth, **Jesus closes his word about salt with a warning. If his followers are not who we're supposed to be, if we're not getting out of the comfort of the salt shaker and carrying out our function to add flavor, zest and life to others, if we aren't preserving and passing on Jesus' teaching, if we aren't purifying corruption and decay, if we aren't providing traction to people who are slipping and falling in life, then Jesus says, we're good for nothing except to be thrown out and walked on.** God will cast us out and seek new salt. That is a sobering thought that should motivate us all to action.

There are many kinds of salt. A man walked into a mom-and-pop grocery store and asked, "Do you sell salt?" "Ha!" said Pop. "Do we sell salt! Just look!" And Pop showed the customer one entire wall of shelves stocked with nothing but salt—Morton salt, iodized salt, kosher salt, sea salt, rock salt, garlic salt, seasoning salt, Epsom salts—every kind of salt imaginable. "Wow!" said the customer. "You think that's something?" said Pop with a wave of his hand. "That's nothing! Come look." And Pop led the customer to a back room filled with shelves and bins and cartons and barrels and boxes of salt. "Do we sell salt!" he said. "Unbelievable!" said the customer. "You think that's something?" said Pop. "Come! I'll show you salt!" And Pop led the customer down some steps into a huge basement, five times as large as the previous room, filled wall, floor, to ceiling, with every imaginable form and size and shape of salt—even huge ten-pound salt licks for the cow pasture. "Incredible!" said the customer. "You really do sell salt!" **"No!" said Pop. "That's just the problem! We never sell salt! But that salt salesman—Boy! Does he sell salt!"**¹

Salt that stays on the shelf doesn't do any good at all. Salt is made to get out of the saltshaker and into the world. Salt sitting in a container or a little paper packet or in a pretty, ornamental, crystal saltshaker doesn't do any good, doesn't fulfill its function and purpose, doesn't add anything to life. In fact, in humid weather what happens to salt in a saltshaker if it isn't used? All the individual grains of salt end up all stuck together and they can't get out of the saltshaker like they're supposed to. They get all clumped together, hanging on to each other and as a result the salt is useless—it can't do what you put it in the saltshaker to do. The same thing can happen to Christians and the church. We can end up spending so much time together with our Christian friends and folks from church. We can spend so much time at church and hanging out with each other that we end up stuck together and we don't do what we were put in the saltshaker to do. Jesus is saying that God will do the same thing with us that we do with our saltshaker when the salt clumps together with other pieces of salt, which is take the cap off, throw out the clumpy salt that forgot its function, and put new salt in. Now I

¹ D. James Kennedy, *Led by the Carpenter* (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 46.

know at this moment, that the Julia Childs, Rachel Rays, and Bobby Flays in worship are thinking, "Well if you put rice in the saltshaker, then the salt doesn't stick together." It probably says something positive about the value of diversity in the church that it's a good thing to have some rice in among the salt!

One final important point about salt is, salt can only fulfill its function and purpose when it's in close proximity to what it's going to flavor, preserve, purify, or provide traction for. Salt must be in touch with fried clams or French fries to flavor them. You can put the saltshaker right next to the French fry, but it won't do any good. Churches and Christians are the same way, we can be plunked down on Main Street in the middle of town in a big white saltshaker like ours, but as followers of Christ we need to be in close proximity to the people for whom we are to be salt and light, which is why we're to reach out to and get to know our neighbors. Jesus says the salt **is for the earth**, not for us.

We live in a world that is filled with corruption, violence, selfishness, racism, incompetence, spiritual emptiness, poverty, injustice, and hunger. There were plenty of examples of all of these again this past week. God calls us to be salt and light in a world desperate for life and light. God doesn't bless us so we can hide in the safety of a saltshaker or under an overturned bushel basket. In an age when many people think the church is no more than useless salt and a light unto ourselves, Jesus is longing for us to break out into the world with clear demonstrations of God's love and compassion. Every single one of us is a grain of salt in the saltshaker of God. The Almighty is looking upon the people of Cape Cod and at the saltshaker that is the church. When God sees someone, who needs a little life, love and hope, God picks up the saltshaker and starts shaking until hopefully at least one of us moves out into proximity with that person.

Taking the time to visit someone who may not be able to come to church or be involved as they were in the past, making a phone call, driving someone to a medical appointment, sending a card or email, getting someone groceries, mowing a lawn, being with someone and listening, all of these are ways we can get out of the salt shaker and make a difference in someone's life. The needs are different for those dealing with illness, infirmity or recovering from surgery compared to a caregiver or a single parent in crisis with her or his children, but the feeling of being overwhelmed is often the same. Each day is a chance to be a gift to someone. There are countless ways that we can reach out and when we don't, life and communities and our nation and world become more broken. When people are ignored or forgotten, their lives become more difficult. God calls us to be the salt of the earth and people all around us need us to be salt in their lives.

We don't want to be a church where all the people lock hands together, holding on to each other, saying, "I'm not going out there, do you know what those people are like? I'm not trained, I'm not prepared, I'm too weak, I'm too old, I'm too young, I don't know enough, I know too much, I'm too tired, I'm too busy..." All the while God keeps shaking the saltshaker because God made us to be poured out for others just like Jesus was. The life, love and light

we share is not for our sake or so that folks will say we're wonderful. Jesus says we let our light shine before others, **so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.**

Some people like to carry around a cross in their pocket or on a necklace as a reminder of Jesus' sacrifice for us. This passage from *Matthew 5* makes me wonder if we should be carrying around a little packet of salt and maybe a flashlight to remind us of who Jesus says we are and what we're called to do. As you leave today, our Worship Welcomers are going to give you a little packet of salt to carry around in your pocket to remind you how God wants to use you. And I hope every time you see a saltshaker or a packet or container or salt or even taste the salt on your lips after a swim this summer that it will remind you of who God called you to be and what God wants you to do.

Prayer: Help us to bring salt into the blandness of life, encouraging vitality and joy in living in a world that dares to hope for the future that you promise where all your children will know themselves loved and valued and treasured, created in your image, bringing you glory forever. Amen.

Blessing:

"Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." *Mark 9:50b*

"Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world." *Philippians 2:14-15*

"For once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." *Ephesians 5:8-9*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you use salt on your food, what is your favorite food to have with salt? What food wouldn't taste the same to you without it?
2. Can you recall a time when you were someplace very dark, and you were grateful that you or someone else was able to shine a light?
3. Salt and light are two entities that, if they're functioning properly, have the power to transform everything they touch. What would a "salty" and light-filled church look like?
4. Discuss some ways you, individually, and we, collectively, can be "salt" and "light" in our neighborhoods and our communities?
5. According to *Matthew 5:16*, what is the purpose of letting our light shine?
6. Look at the people around you as you go about each day and ask yourself, "Is Christ trying to get me out of the saltshaker and into her or his life? What value can I add to them, how can I be a blessing to them through a word of encouragement, a prayer, or an act of compassion or service?"