

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

February 6, 2011

Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today, after the sermon, when we share Communion by Intinction, you will file up the center aisle to where I am standing in front of the Altar. I will take our loaf of Communion bread, break off a piece and give it to you saying, “The bread of life.”

This loaf, the bread of life, that will feed us all Communion today, is part of a long and very special tradition in this Church. Our Communion bread for today was made by Shirley Warner. And in this Church, a member of the Warner family has made the Communion bread since 1945. For decades it was Helen Warner who carried out this act of love. When Helen became too weak, her daughter Shirley took over the task. Since Helen died, Shirley continues this tradition in Helen’s memory and as a gift of love and a service to us all.

I asked Shirley this week what ingredients go into our Communion bread every month. Without pausing, she rattled off this list: whole wheat flour, oil, butter, milk, eggs, yeast, water, honey and salt. As you all know, our Communion bread is especially delicious. And apparently every ingredient in the bread is critical...it would not taste as good as it does if one part, even a small part, was missing.

In our Scripture reading for today, Jesus tells the crowd in his famous Sermon on the Mount, “You are the salt of the earth.” Given that metaphor used by Jesus, I have been thinking about salt all week. I have been wondering why Jesus chose that image, and I have been thinking that the symbol of Jesus’ followers being the salt of the earth is quite powerful.

Let’s pause for a moment and consider the mineral salt. Apparently, it is essential for animal and plant life in small quantities but harmful to animals and plants in excess. Sodium and chlorine ions, the two major components of salt, are needed by all known living creatures but they must be in the right balance—too little or too much and you’re in trouble.

Salt is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous food seasonings and salting has been used for millennia as a method of food preservation. Scholars have dated the harvesting of salt all the way back to 6000 BCE in China.

In the Hebrew Bible, thirty-five verses mention salt, one of which being the story of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as they were destroyed (Genesis 19:26).

When King Abimelech destroyed the city of Shechem, he is said to have "sown salt on it," probably as a curse on anyone who would re-inhabit it (Judges 9:45).

And the Book of Job contains the first mention of salt in all literature. "Can that which is unsavory be eaten without salt? Or is there any taste in the white of an egg?" (Job 6:6)

As Judaism is practiced today, it is recommended to have a salty bread when doing Kiddush for Shabbat. To preserve the covenant between their people and God, Jews spread salt over the bread or to dip the bread in salt when they pass the Sabbath bread around the table.

In the New Testament, six verses mention salt. One is our reading for today from the Book of Matthew in which Jesus refers to his followers as the "salt of the earth." Another is in Paul's letter to the church in Colossae—the apostle encourages Christians to "let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6).

The taste of salt (saltiness) is one of the basic human tastes. Shirley adds salt to our loaf of Communion bread every month because salt brings out the flavor of the other ingredients. The salt in the bread enhances the taste of the milk, honey and eggs. In fact, when I consulted some cookbooks in our house, I found to my surprise that salt is included in almost every recipe. I was not surprised to find salt as a key ingredient in the stews, soups and added to roasts. But according to the *Joy of Cooking* (and who would argue with that revered tome?), salt is added to sugar cookies, chocolate chip cookies, gingersnaps, snickerdoodles, meringue

kisses and coconut macaroons. In fact, when I looked through the cookbook, salt is found on almost every page.

What is interesting about salt is that in small quantities it brings out the flavoring of all the other ingredients, but when used too liberally it totally ruins the food. A little salt goes a long way. A little salt improves the flavor of every other ingredient, too much salt spoils everything.

I think salt in our food is a good metaphor for the expression of faith in our lives. I don't mean that too much faith spoils everything...I don't think we can have too much faith. But I do think that expressing our faith too much, being over-bearing about our faith and beliefs can ruin a relationship.

I think our faith needs to be a part of everything we do, like salt is a part of almost all the recipes in the *Joy of Cooking*, but I think it needs to be somewhat hidden, like the salt hidden in snickerdoodles brings out the flavor of the sugar, butter and eggs.

I think our faith needs to inform our actions, our choices, our words and our interactions but not necessarily always be named. Our faith should enhance what we do, like salt enhances Shirley's Communion bread, but not be overpowering and alienate those with whom we interact.

We can be true to our Christian beliefs and follow Jesus' teachings faithfully without carrying a Bible, quoting Scripture, or proselytizing. Our faith can simply guide and direct our actions and augment, increase and boost all our good works like salt does in food.

People can notice and wonder at our generosity, our commitment to the poor, our inclusive and expansive love of the human family, our work for justice and our buoyant spirit. And then, should they discover that we are people of faith, they can say, "Ah-h-h-h-h, that's it." Like salt undetected in a coconut macaroon, our faith not mentioned in every breath or in every conversation, brings out the best in us and flavors everything we do.

We don't need to literally carry a Bible and thump it to make our point that God directs our lives. We need to carry a Bible inside—like salt buried in a chocolate chip cookie—and make sure our faith is there positively affecting all the other ingredients in our lives.

You have heard me quote one of my very favorite theological expressions of all time which was said by St. Francis: “Preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary use words.” That’s the salt in us. We are preaching the Gospel at all times through our choices and our good works and deeds. We don’t need to use words to spread the good news that Jesus came to share, we need to LIVE the good news that Jesus came to share.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered the Beatitudes which turned the world his followers knew and experienced completely upside down:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Immediately following these blessings for the unexpected, the unlikely and some thought the undeserving, Jesus says, “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, Jesus is saying, are my disciples, my followers, my advocates, my heirs. You must put me inside you and behave as I behave....you must love the poor, bless the meek, act righteously, show mercy, live with a pure heart, and be a peacemaker. You must put me inside you, hide me inside you—the way salt is hidden in food—and LIVE the Gospel. Because, Jesus says, if the salt loses its taste, it is no longer good.

Our faith must inform our daily life, our hourly decisions and our choices. We need not announce each day for all to hear that we act the way we act because we are Christians, we simply need to behave as true Christ-followers and when folks learn that we are people of faith they will understand.

What we value, what we spend and where, who we care for and why, the ways we speak, the things we risk, the daily choices we make are influenced by our faith...a faith that is tucked inside us and shows up enhancing and enlarging everything we do.

While thinking this week about salt hidden in food, our faith hidden in our hearts, and our behaviors fashioned by our love of God, I read this story sent to me on e-mail by our Susan Farrell. Listen to this story and see if you think, as I do, that it applies to the “salt of the earth” message Jesus shared in the Sermon on the Mount. The story seems to demonstrate what happens when our faith, the presence of the salt inside us, is missing or has lost its taste....what happens when all we have are the slogans of our faith but NOT the key ingredient:

The light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating and charging through the intersection. The woman in the car behind him, tailgating right on his back bumper, was furious! She honked her horn and screamed in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

As she was still yelling, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. The woman was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

The arresting officer looked at the woman and said, "I am very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, yelling at the guy in front of you and swearing a blue streak. I noticed the "What Would Jesus Do" bumper sticker on your car, the "Jesus Is The Way" license plate holder, the "Follow Me to Sunday School" bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so I assumed you had stolen the car."

Remember that old and wise expression....actions speak louder than words...

What we do reflects who we are. We can talk endlessly about our faith and how much we love God, but it just might be too much salt in the stew. If we carry Jesus and what he modeled during his lifetime always inside us, our faith will flavor our actions and we'll preach the Gospel without using words.

Keep your faith present in your heart and at the core of your being. Like the salt in a sweet meringue, your faith will bring out the best in all the other ingredients in your life.

Now let us share Communion, enjoying the milk, honey and eggs in Shirley's Communion loaf....and appreciating the salt...undetected but indispensable...in each mouthful. Amen.

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