

## Stay Salty

Salt is a very important thing. The basic chemical, sodium chloride is the result of two elements that simply love to be together. It's one of those divine matches, like two hydrogen and one oxygen, where the elements have precisely the right number of electrons to share in a nice snug covalent bond. Sodium and chlorine mostly get together dissolved in that H<sub>2</sub>O, the universal solvent, and almost 70% of our planet is covered with salt water. Our own bodies need salt, if you've ever tasted your own sweat dripping off of your face, or bit your lip really good, you know that sweat and blood are both salty. Salt is one of the most basic ways to preserve food and make food taste better, it can melt ice and make your mouth water. But would you know how to get it if you couldn't just go to the store and buy one of those little blue canisters of Morton's?

Well, you might find a place in nature where salt has crystallized naturally, usually a place where some sea water has dried up slowly enough to leave behind the precious white stuff. That's probably where the first humans to use it found it, but pretty quickly they found that they needed more than they could simply scrape off the rocks and they began to help the process along, boiling salty water slowly and helping those little crystals form as the water went away by stirring gently. It takes a long time and doesn't produce very much, so in the ancient world salt was often a form of currency. It wasn't that ancient people just loved them some salty snacks either, in a world where refrigeration wasn't a thing, it was the preservative quality of salt that really drove the demand. Its value was related to its usefulness.

I think that there is a correlation between these three very different little snippets, which demonstrates the process by which God brings out our salt. The disciples demonstrate this first, in asking Jesus about the other exorcist, the one using Jesus' name, but not really following him. This is a moment where their inclination is to try and enforce their special status in the "club," apparently not really getting the message about humility and welcoming little ones that we read about last week. They're right back at it, trying to push someone off of the platform so that they can be special. They're salt water, they aren't good to drink, but they're not salty enough.

Jesus rebukes them by telling them that the result of this man casting out demons in his name is not contrary to their mission. It would have been different if the man was blaspheming in Jesus' name, or making claims that Jesus was something he was not, but the fact was that the man was helping people, which is what Jesus does and what Jesus values. Kindness rather than trying to make sure everyone is suitable for the club is important; a cup of water in the name of Christ is a blessed act.

Then he goes on to warn them, and that's where this takes a turn for the dramatic, about the consequences of being a stumbling block: a millstone around their neck. He goes on to talk about cutting off body parts and gouging out eyeballs and being thrown into hell where the worm does not die and the fire is never quenched. You can almost hear the disciples going: "Well, that escalated quickly."

I think these moments where Jesus appears to be quite harsh, are moments where he is turning up the heat a bit to help encourage the saltiness. Think of the old process of salt making by desalination. The disciples still have too much water, they're thinking about themselves and their little club, they're thinking about personal greatness instead of the Kingdom of God. By turning up the heat, by getting a bit stern and by speaking in these dramatic figures of speech, Jesus is helping some of that water that is restraining their "saltiness," evaporate away. When they appear to be a little too content to just remain where they are, he ratchets up the intensity to a point where it really gets your attention.

On Tuesday night at Presbytery we had a woman named Catherine Meeks give us a talk about the work she has been doing with a task group in the Presbytery about dismantling racism. Dr. Meeks was born as the daughter of a sharecropper in Arkansas, and has spent her life as a civil rights advocate and academic. She was quite on fire, so I'm going to steal some stuff from her sermon. She reminded us of something that one of her teachers Howard Thurman, writer of what I consider one of the most important books of American Theology, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, used to say about the work of the spiritual journey of discipleship. It is trying to find the "irreducible residue" of who you are, because that is the part of you that is what God will use. I would say that the "irreducible residue," of our soul is what Jesus is calling our salt.

Dr. Meeks reminded us that if we don't work from a place of true connection to the Spirit of God, we will not be able to accomplish much of anything good or holy. If we want to change the world, and we should want to change the world, we must work with God's Spirit. Jesus says, "everyone will be salted with fire." He's pretty surely talking about the Holy Spirit, the salt that is within each one of us is that Spirit, but we are an aqueous solution out of which that salt must come, so heat, in other words suffering, in other words deep searching, in other words prayer and obedience to the word, in other words discipleship.

That's what all the dramatics in that middle section are about. Sometimes letting go of our own ego is as difficult and painful as cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye. Sometimes recognizing the places where our sin has gotten too much of a hold on our lives is as crippling as losing a foot. Sometimes we find that our own will and pride has become a millstone around our neck. It's not that the salt is not there, it's just that it's been diluted with way too much water to be noticeable. I think that's important, it's not really that salt loses its saltiness, it just gets diluted with too much other stuff. The Spirit doesn't go away from us, we just don't always live according to her presence.

It bears mentioning as well that the Spirit doesn't look the same in everyone. Even once it is brought out, the effect of salt might be very different. Each of the disciples walked a different path, and so do we. Salt for instance has one effect when it is used for curing meat, and another when it is simply used to flavor soup. Salt that is put on a melon doesn't make the melon salty, it brings out the sweetness a little more. The Spirit interacts with each one of us a little differently, but whatever the Spirit does in us is good and holy and reflects God's love. If it doesn't reflect God's love, it is not from the Spirit and it needs to be gone. "Have salt within yourselves, and be at peace with one another."