

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany + February 5, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
Matthew 5:13-20

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

How many of you are on low-sodium diets? Or are forbidden by your doctors from having salt in your diet altogether?

It's no fun. In what were to be the last few months of my mother-in-law's life, she was put on a strict salt-free diet by her doctor who, I have to say, didn't know what he was doing. She was miserable on this diet because, to her, food had no taste. She did have chronic high blood pressure but she was actually dying of an unrelated condition that wasn't even diagnosed until shortly before she died, and which had nothing to do with salt in her diet.

For those of you on similar regimens, thank goodness we have Mrs. Dash and other seasonings that can mask the absence of salt. But there's no substitute for the real thing.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus tells the disciples, and of course since the Bible is a living book, he is talking directly to us as well. "But if salt has lost its taste," he continues, "how can its saltiness be restored?"

People disagree about what property of salt Jesus is talking about—salt as seasoning? As preservative? As purifier, or fertilizer? I think it's pretty clear he is talking about salt as seasoning. Food is essential for life. We must eat, and without salt, food loses that property that keeps us coming back to it, and well-nourished—its good taste. Without salt, food loses its identity. Things kind of all start to taste the same, or at least, they seem to be missing their distinctive flavorings.

The same is true of us, as children of God. If we lose our distinctive flavoring, our seasoning, we lose our identity as inhabitants of God's kingdom. Let's take a look at how this can happen and what the consequences are.

God gives each of us unique gifts. Some we are born with and inherit through genetics—such as musical or artistic ability. Others we work hard at and grow into, such as being a successful small business owner. Perhaps you saw this story in Thursday’s paper about Adrian Diaz, the Beloit Memorial High School junior and two-time cancer survivor who has just opened his own restaurant. Adrian asks his business teachers questions every chance he gets, and one can only imagine the long hours he works, on top of going to school. Because of our parents and our upbringing, each of us has a unique perspective on life that informs everything we do. All these things go into making up our “saltiness.” In terms of who we are, it’s what makes us distinctive.

But these can be buried or dulled by the circumstances of our life as it unfolds. Perhaps we had an oppressive father who would not allow us to speak freely at home and forced us to conform to how he thought we should behave—a way of being that blurred, or even erased, all the distinctive edges of our character. Perhaps we suffered a terrible loss at some point—the death of a child, or of a spouse without whom we could not imagine going on—a loss that caused the salty part of us to simply shut down as we withdrew into ourselves. Or perhaps we became oppressed, enslaved, even, by a mindless job that stripped us of our human dignity and of the awareness of our own creativity—our creativity being that most human expression of who we are. In all these ways, we can lose our saltiness. How can our saltiness be restored?

But in the midst of our dulled, grief-stricken, or resigned way of being that we just described, let us remember from last week’s Beatitudes what is entrusted to us: We are the blessed inheritors of God’s kingdom. In our meekness, in our poverty, in our humility, in our sorrow, we are deeply, spiritually happy because we are able to come to know Jesus directly, intimately, with no worldly distractions standing in our way.

In today's reading, Jesus is calling us to the way of life that defines those in God's kingdom: We are salt, and light. The healing of the universe depends on us, on our saltiness and the brightness of our light. What does that way of living look like, which gives us this distinctive flavor?

It looks like this: We see the world as it really is and name what we see. We know what is truth and what is falsehood, and we let that be known. We speak the truth, yet always in an attitude of love. Because justice is grounded in truth, we crusade tirelessly for justice. We are bold, even reckless, in our desire to help our neighbor. We perform random acts of kindness without even thinking about it. We advocate for the poor, for those on the margins of society, and for those who lack the rights and privileges to which we are accustomed—privileges of race, economic status, or citizenship. We give the coat off our back to anyone who needs it. We love even those who turn against us.

Our angry, exuberant first reading today from Isaiah, one of my favorite passages in all scripture, lays out clearly the kind of lives we are to lead. You have to picture Isaiah shouting at the faithless people of Israel, with whom he is really fed up:

"Even though you are supposedly seeking God day after day by fasting and other religious practices," the prophet yells, "look at yourselves! Look at your behavior! You're only serving your own self interests. Either you fast only in order to pick fights with those who aren't, or you're just making a spectacle of yourselves by sitting there in your sackcloth and ashes. What good is that? How does that help people in need?"

"Here is what a real fast, a real show of penitence and commitment consists of: Loosen the bonds of injustice! Let the oppressed go free! Share your bread with the hungry! Bring the homeless into your house! And when you see someone without clothes, for goodness' sake, give

them some!” THEN, the prophet says, you will be vindicated. “Your light will break forth like the dawn. You shall call and the Lord will answer: You shall cry for help, and God will say, ‘Here I am!’”

This, friends, is how we are to live. Our devotions and personal acts of piety are fine and certainly pleasing to God. But as we said, God is in the process of mending the universe, and we are key players. Things can’t be put back together if we stay in our little rooms behind closed doors. God needs us, in all our saltiness, to shine all the light we can into dark places.

How this takes shape will be different for each of us. For some it simply means giving to charitable organizations that serve those in need. For others it means political advocacy—making signs, marching in the public square, writing or calling your elected representatives. For others it means working at a food pantry or homeless shelter. For still others, it means coming up with completely new ideas to fix the economic imbalance in our country and world between those who have way more than they need and others who have practically nothing.

And what is the result of all this? It’s not just that the world will be a better place, but that YOU will find new life. To quote the end of our Isaiah reading:

...then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

AMEN.