

“You are the salt of the earth. But, if that salt has lost its flavor, it ain’t got much in its favor. You can’t have that fault and be the salt of the earth.”

~Stephen Schwartz, *Godspell*

Jesus was saying some really important stuff to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Last week we had the Beatitudes. This week, we find out that we are light and salt and a city on a hill. It’s pretty easy to understand the light and the city, but salt? Why salt? Why couldn’t we be the cinnamon of the earth or the curry of the earth or the saffron of the earth? They’re so much ‘spicier’, so much more ‘exciting’ somehow. Salt...how banal, how lowly.

Or is it?

In Jesus’ time, the stuff that’s in the shakers on your dining room table was hardly the everyday commodity that it is today. Salt built communities as explorers used the trails to salt licks made by animals as guiding paths.

Those paths eventually led to trails and roads, which became the foundation for settlements. As more land became civilized, salt was needed to maintain health. It became a valuable resource.

People used salt for many things. Salt helped preserve food. It made food taste better. It’s also an antiseptic. The Romans called the crystals “sal” after the goddess of health Salus.

Because soldiers were paid partially in salt, we have the word ‘sal-ary’ as a benefit. And, if you didn’t perform to expectations, you were no longer worth ‘your salt’.

In Old Testament times, salt was a symbol of permanence. God’s promise to David that his line would inhabit the throne of Israel was called a Salt Covenant. And, being turned into a pillar of salt became a permanent state for poor Lot’s wife. The purifying aspects of salt could be found in the rites of the temple, as people would offer salt as sacrifice or when Romans would place grains of salt on an infant’s lips to make the child ‘pure’. We still see this today in some churches, where a small amount of salt is placed in the water used for baptism. (<http://time.com/3957460/a-brief-history-of-salt/>)

So, when Jesus’ told his disciples that they were the salt of the earth, he wasn’t saying that they were ‘down to earth nice people’. He was telling them how valuable they were, how rare they were, how eternally grateful he was for them. Jesus was counting on them to continue sharing the spice of life – their saltiness – with others. He trusted them with the good news that God’s love was for all.

He knew this wasn't going to be easy. Jesus was already having difficulties with the authorities who believed that rules were more important than relationships. The Hebrew people had a history of conflating their belief in Yahweh with other god's as well. What Jesus needed his disciples to understand was that they needed to be grounded in this new revelation of God, and permanently so. Their salt would indeed be tested, as would Jesus's.

So what do we modern-day disciples think about Jesus' message? I know that I appreciate the ego-boost of being told that I am valuable, spicy even. Yet, it is a huge responsibility, and sometimes a real burden, to stay salty, to keep my faith in the face of tribulation.

To tell you the truth, what I do in these situations is to remember the positive stories. Obviously, the resurrection of Christ is the first go-to story. Is there anything more positive than God bringing forth life from death? I don't think so. It is the ultimate reminder that this is God's universe and God's love will prevail.

Christians have a long history of stories on which to fall back when they are discouraged. I think about Julian of Norwich. Walled into a section of the local church, Julian consoled, counseled, and cajoled the myriad of pilgrims who came to her in the midst of the worst plague England had ever seen. She reminded them and us that “all shall be well.”

I think about Catherine of Siena, who gathered up her righteous indignation to dress down Pope Gregory XI for his opulent living in Avignon and told him to get his butt back to Rome where he belonged.

In modern days we have Frances Perkins who, taking Christ’s mandate of serving the poor seriously, helped to establish the Social Security system we hold dear.

And, don’t forget Julia Chester Emery, a woman of vision who established the United Thank offering within the Episcopal Church, which continues as one of the greatest fundraising avenues for ministry to the poor that the church has. Wow – look at what salty women can do.

There were salty men as well. Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple reminded the English people that the church existed not for its members, but for those who haven't arrived yet. He advocated for social justice regarding Jewish immigrants during World War II.

C.S. Lewis, out of his own grief, wrote some of the most helpful theological texts of the last century. He also created stories to help share the good news with children.

And, Louis Crew Clay refused to stay in a suffocating closet and by his witness to Christ and Christ's love established the organization called Integrity as a ministry of witness to LGBT persons within and outside of the church.

Of all these salty Christians, did you note that only one was ordained? That's right, it's the stories of salty lay people that keep me going when life gets exasperating. These folks were/are living the good news every day, in the midst of the turmoil of their days and times of their lives. They had the freedom of not being professional Christians, which makes their witness to us today even more powerful.

So as you sojourn into this time that seems to be dripping with pessimism, anger, and despair, remember these saints. They were no better and no worse than the scrappy individuals gathered on the Mount of Olives with Jesus. More importantly, I hope you will remember the words of Jesus delivered on that hill:

YOU are valuable. YOU have a permanent relationship with God through Jesus Christ. YOU have the duty to tell good news to those who wish to hear it. YOU have the potential of spicing up someone's life by sharing your saltiness with them.

YOU are the salt of the earth.

“So let your light so shine before all, let your light so shine, so that they might know some kindness again. We all need help to feel fine. Let's have some (bread and) wine!”

Amen.