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“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus proclaimed. For 21st century people, that doesn’t seem overly complimentary as salt is so common. In fact, we don’t often think of salt as a commodity to be bought and sold commercially except in our grocery stores.

We probably don’t even consider there’s much to know about salt or to be learned other than flavoring or preserving our food and salt for wintry roads. However, there is more to salt than we realize. In fact, it seems that one can write a whole history of the world just by tracing what has happened with salt. There is actually a book written by Mark Kulansky called *Salt: A World History* in which he chronicles how ancient people believed that salt would ward off evil spirits. Religious covenants were often sealed with salt. Salt was used for medicinal purposes, to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, stimulate thirst, and treat skin diseases. He also chronicles the many wars that have been won and lost on the basis of who has control of the stores of salt. Governments have found salt to be a lucrative means of raising money -- by controlling and taxing it. At different points in history, salt has been the currency of commerce. One interesting fact that I read that I didn’t know and perhaps you might not either is that the word salary has its Latin roots in the understanding that the worker was paid in order to be able to 'buy salt.

Up until a hundred years ago, salt was scarce so as a commodity was very precious. And in the time of Jesus and long before that and ever since, salt was necessary for the preservation of food. Having it or not having it was the difference between life and death. The book “Unbroken” is about an Olympian champion from 1936 who during World War II became a bombardier and ended up in a POW camp in Japan. Their diet was so deficient in sodium that it left many of them crippled with muscle cramps and other ailments. So, they developed a system for stealing and processing salt. The raw salt form was inedible, so they had to process it by dumping it into their canteens of water then boiling it so only the edible salt residue was left. It was a treasure beyond price. Salt was for them literally a matter of life and death.

We don’t often think of salt that way because more often than not we are told to cut down on our salt intake because too much salt is not good for us either. Besides flavoring our food, salt has thousands of other purposes. It softens water, melts the ice on sidewalks, and when gargled can soothe a sore throat, to name just a few.

Nowadays, salt is relatively cheap. Indeed, the metaphor Jesus offers now means more to me knowing all of this about salt. When Jesus preached so long ago, salt was extremely valuable. And it matters that Jesus says to those who were listening then and to those who listen still: "You are the salt of the earth."

First of all, we are precious. Again, it’s easy to miss the importance of this in our modern world where salt is cheap and plentiful, but imagine what Jesus’s first followers would have heard when he called them salt. Remember who they were. Remember what sorts of people Jesus addressed in his famous Sermon on the Mount. The poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted. The hungry, the sick, the crippled, the frightened. The outcast, the misfit, the disreputable, the demon-possessed. “You,” he told them all. “You are the salt of the earth.” You who are not cleaned up and shiny and well-fed and fashionable, you who’ve been rejected, wounded, unloved, and forgotten — you are essential. You are worthwhile. You are treasured. Jesus knowingly named a

commodity that was priceless in his time and place. He conferred great value on those who did not consider themselves valuable. He is still doing this. For us here and now.

Secondly, Jesus is telling them and us who we are when he says we're salt. We are not "supposed to be" salt, or "encouraged to become" salt, or promised that "if we become" salt, God will love us more. We are the salt of the earth and Jesus declares it's a statement of our identity. And as salt we can either enhance or embitter, soothe or irritate, melt or sting, preserve or ruin. For better or for worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters. It matters a lot. Whether we want to or not, whether we notice or not, whether we're intentional about it or not, we spiritually impact the world we live in.

Thirdly, salt does its best work when it's poured out and scattered and most of all when it dissolves into what is around it. Salt isn't meant to sit on a shelf. It's meant to share its unique flavor in order to bring out the best in all that surrounds it. Which means that if we want to enliven, enhance, deepen, and preserve the world we live in, we must not hide within the walls of our churches. We must not congregate simply for our own comfort. We must not retreat into our pious, churchy bubbles out of fear, cynicism, shame, or self-righteousness. Salt doesn't exist to preserve itself; it exists to preserve what is *not* itself. For us, it's not a question of striving to become what we are not. It's a question of living into the precious fullness of what we already are.

Lastly, salt is meant to enhance, not dominate. Christian saltiness should never leave the already thirsty parched, dehydrated, and embittered. One of the great tragedies and most consequential sins of historic Christianity has been its failure to understand this distinction. When we put too much salt into a dish it will dominate the dish and instead of enhancing the goodness it destroys the richness. Salt poured out without discretion will leave a burnt, bitter sensation in its wake. It basically ruins what it tries to enhance.

This, unfortunately, is the reputation Christianity has all-too-often these days. We wonder why so many people don't want to go to church or be associated with Christians. It's because they've experienced or hear how the church has become the salt that exacerbates wounds, irritates souls, and ruins goodness. We are considered arrogant, domineering, obnoxious, and uninterested in enhancing anything but ourselves. We are known for shaming, not blessing and for using our words to burn, not heal.

This is not what Jesus ever intended when he called us the salt of the earth. Our preciousness was never meant to make us proud and self-righteous; it was meant to humble and awe us.

So what do we do? Our vocation in these times and places is not to lose our saltiness because that kind of salt, Jesus told his listeners, is useless. And so we are called to live wisely, creatively, and in balance. To learn how much salt to use. Salt at its best sustains and enriches life. It pours itself out with discretion so that God's kingdom might be known on the earth, a kingdom of health and wholeness, a kingdom of varied depth, flavor, and complexity.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes concrete the work of love, compassion, healing, and justice. It's not enough to simply believe or to bask in our blessedness while all around us people are hurting. To be blessed, to be salt, to be followers of Jesus, is to take seriously what our identity signifies.

We are the salt of the earth. That is what we are, for better or for worse. May we recognize how precious we are in God's sight and may we show others they too are the salt of the earth and are valued, loved and priceless in God's eyes. Amen