

Properly Seasoned?

a sermon based on

Matthew 5:13-20

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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There's a story about an old farmer who one day realized the oats that he was feeding his mule were simply too expensive. So, to stretch the oat budget he came up with a plan: he'd mix in a little bit of sawdust with the oats, and then add a little more the next day, and again the next so that the cost of feeding the mule would go down.

It worked. The mule didn't even seem to notice the gradual change. This was encouraging. So the farmer decided to keep at it: each day, gradually increasing the proportion of sawdust to oats. A few months later it happened that he fed the mule nothing but oats. Amazingly! The mule fell over dead.¹

Who could have seen that coming? Oats that have lost their *oatiness* will starve a mule. The oats themselves have not gone bad, but have dissipated. In the Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples (rhetorically) how salt that has lost its taste – its saltiness – might have its saltiness restored. The answer is it can't.

First, we need to acknowledge that Jesus wasn't giving a chemistry lesson, here. Salt – sodium chloride – doesn't lose its saltiness. The salt Jesus was talking about was the cakes of salt that people would generally use for preserving (and sometimes seasoning) food. It would have come from dried lake beds or other deposits. It wouldn't just be sodium chloride but a mix of minerals, unlike the table salt that we buy today which has been highly refined to leave only salt, with maybe a bit of an anticaking agent and iodine added.

Sometimes a merchant would mix in a little bit of gypsum into the salt to stretch it and increase his profit. You can see how that might affect things as the salt goes through the trade chain. Also, salt dissolves in water. Humidity might dissolve and leach some of the salt – the sodium chloride away – so that the *salt* that remains is really not very salty. In fact, what one is left with is gypsum (the stuff that makes up drywall) something useless except for throwing into the street.

Why this talk about salt? Why does Jesus use this example? This is all part of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. As we read the Bible, this comes immediately after the Beatitudes. It begins with some really good news: “You are the salt of the earth.” (Mt 5:13a) Salt was often more valuable by weight than gold. Think about that for a moment. Jesus says to his disciples – to us – “You are the salt of the earth.” He follows up, “You are the light of the world.” (Mt 5:14a) Salt and light offer hope to others.

As light that means we have the potential illuminate possibilities for others. As salt – a preservative – we have the potential to bring life. As salt the seasoning – we can bring out the best in it.

Sometimes people make that mistake with salt. Properly used as a seasoning, salt doesn't cover up foul tastes but instead helps to enhance and draw out the goodness that is already there. And that's what Jesus says we are. Are we though?

At our best, we are? But what about when our saltiness fades? Jesus says that “unless (our” righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, (we) will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:20) This can be confusing. Can't it? How often does Jesus criticize the scribes and the Pharisees for their tenacity in applying the law? Now he tells us that we have to be better.

Today is Scouting Sunday, we have Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, (Cub Scouts and Brownies). At the beginning of our service they recited the Boy Scout law and the Girl Scout law. “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” These are what define a good boy scout. A Girl Scout (and I'm going to paraphrase because I wasn't ever a Girl Scout) is honest and faithful, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, responsible for what she says and does, respectful of herself and other, respectful of authority. She uses resources wisely and is a sister to every Girl Scout. That

¹ Robert Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 2000) 43.

is the definition of a Girl Scout. These are what define scouts. Even though the wording differs, the characteristics correspond.

What if a scout (boy or girl) lacks in one of those areas? Are they still a good scout? Having shared a cabin with a few boys who didn't quite get the idea of clean, I ask this seriously. Does a scout get to pick and choose? As long as you're courteous and kind, is it okay to be dishonest or unreliable? Your pack, your troop, your patrol, depend on you exhibiting the fullness of a good scout. I'm going to say it again – even cleanliness. {aside}Sorry, just some haunting memories.

Likewise, when Jesus talks to his disciples he tells us that we don't get to pick and choose which portion of the law that applies to us. Even when St. Paul declares that he will become all things to all people: a Jew to win over Jews, one outside the law to win over those outside the law, weak for the sake of the weak, he begins by saying that he limits himself as a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. (1 Cor. 9:17-23) That's what it means to be salt. He doesn't abandon righteousness for the sake of relevancy. That's a word that some often use to explain why we need to rethink or redefine sin, *relevancy*. We need to be relevant. We do. But relevant means speaking the same language, and using the symbolism and culture of another to communicate the gospel. That's what Paul was doing. He used Scripture and the Law to win over Jews, and explained the gospel in the context of the philosophers and the pantheon to others.

The danger we sometimes face is that as the church we allow things that suck away our saltiness just to be appealing and to keep the institution going. Growing up, there was only one kind of salt – that I knew of anyway, and when it rained it poured. There was rock salt for making ice cream and snow removal, but only one sort of salt for cooking and seasoning. Now there is a plethora. You must try sea salt or pink salt or ... the list goes on. Each of these salts is "better" because of the non-salt features. Logically, if that makes them better, maybe it would be better to increase those other minerals in proportion until eventually, the mule dies. But that doesn't make sense, does it?

When Jesus tells his disciples that they – we – are the salt of the earth, he's telling them (us) that we are special and that he's counting on us. I don't think that he'd be disappointed in perfection, but I also don't think that he expects it either. As those who claim life through his death and resurrection we have real power to bring God's love to the world.

We do it not by demanding righteousness on others and scolding sinners. That was Jesus' problem with the scribes and the Pharisees. Instead, we offer that hope by being salt – bringing out the best in others and setting an example of life.

The danger is what could happen. Ask any rancher about why cattle get lost, he'll tell you they don't just wander off. Instead, they see a little bit of green grass over there and nibble on it. Then they see some over there... and so on and so on until they get lost.²

Salt doesn't just lose its saltiness, it happens over time by neglect or little adulterations. When he asks us to keep his commands, Jesus isn't being bossy; he's leading us to be the best we can be, so that properly seasoned we can lead the world to best that God has instored. AMEN.

² Craig Brian Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Books, 1993) 230.