



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“Please Pass the Salt ”

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“Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves . . .” (Mark 9:50)

November 11, 2012

Collect of the Day

Almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Grant us so firmly to believe in Your Son Jesus that our faith may never be found wanting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

I just finished a book entitled “Salt – A World History” by Mark Kurlansky. It’s all about salt, and its many uses. In the 1920s, the Diamond Crystal Salt Company published a booklet entitled, “One Hundred and One Uses for Diamond Crystal Salt.” The list includes making ice cream freeze; killing poison ivy; and treating earaches” (Salt, p. 5).

It’s the only rock we eat . . . and until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the world’s most sought-after commodities. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt, which is the origin of the word salary, and also of the expression, “worth his salt” or he “earned his salt.” Romans boiled sea water in pottery, which they broke after a solid salt block had formed inside. Romans also pumped seawater into shallow ponds for solar evaporation. They mined rock salt and scraped dry lake beds. They even burned marsh plants to extract salt from the ashes.

Today, salt is so common, so inexpensive that we have forgotten how valuable it once was. In West Africa, a pile of gold would be set out, and a salt merchant would counter with a pile of salt, each side altering their piles until an agreement was reached. No words were exchanged during the process.

Salt preserves – it was used to preserve hams in Spain, mummies in Egypt. Because of its ability to preserve, the Old Testament speaks of a “covenant of salt”. Through the centuries, God would preserve His covenant with Abraham, including the promise of a messiah.

In our text, Jesus says, “Salt is good. But if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty

again?” Now, we know there is no such thing as salt that has lost its saltiness. Sodium chloride is a stable compound which cannot lose its quality. Jesus knows that too; after all, he was in on the creation of salt. He’s simply saying here that salt cannot be anything but salty. In the same way, Christians cannot help but be of service to others. The words of James come to mind. “Faith without works is dead!” You can’t have faith without works, even as you cannot find salt that has lost its saltiness. There is no such thing as “unsalty salt” and there’s no such thing as a Christian who doesn’t serve. Christians have been salted for service. That’s what we do. That’s who we are.

We are the salt of the earth, but at times in our history Christians have tried to separate ourselves from the rest of the world. We have tried to isolate ourselves from the messiness of the world. It’s the oldest heresy in the book, that of Christians trying to remove and protect themselves from the world by cloistering themselves in monasteries and convents. Sometimes churches today try to create a cozy little club for themselves, shunning the very ones Jesus served and loved. Sometimes Christian families today take on that mentality of throwing up the walls and creating safe little enclaves, a sort of hyper domestication to keep themselves clean of the world’s pollution. But it never works. Even the extreme attempts fail miserably.

I remember reading of one Christian hermit in the early centuries of the church. He lived by himself for decades in a cave in a remote and inhospitable part of the desert. He sat in his cave and wrote of his despair, because even out there in the desert, where there were no other humans to envy or slander or lust after or steal from, even out there, there was every temptation in the book. He couldn’t escape sin or temptation.

Another fellow by the name of Simeon in the 5th century subjected himself to severe austerity, shutting himself up for a year and half in a tiny hut while going

through a punishing series of fasts. When escaping the world horizontally didn't work, he tried to escape it vertically, to get above the fray. He found a pillar amid some ruins near Aleppo in Syria. This pillar was over 15 meters tall and he climbed up and built a small platform on top and lived there. He wouldn't allow any women to approach, not even his mother. Boys would use a ladder to give him bits of bread and jars of goat's milk. He lived there for 37 years and still despaired of himself and his sin. There was no escaping it. Somehow, he inspired imitators –others who found pillars of their own and lived on them. They became a kind of burden for the communities nearby, but one the communities bore because they assumed they would benefit from the presence of one wholly devoted to God. More than one of these pillar perchers intentionally glared at the sun until they lost their eyesight, all in an effort to shut out the world and its temptations.

It didn't work then and it doesn't work today. We have three great seducers, the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. You might more or less shut out the world, but there's no wall so thick that the devil can't get through it. Then there's the matter of the sinful flesh, the Old Adam in us, our sinful nature. If the temptations from the world don't come alluring, we can generate plenty of them on our own, without the world's help. In Matthew 15 Jesus said, "For *out of the heart* (not just from the world, but out of the heart) come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (vv.19-20).

Jesus doesn't want us to forsake the world. He loves the world and wants us thoroughly in it, but not of it. You are the salt of the earth, he says, but you cannot be the salt of the earth if you're trying to shut the earth out. And it's hard to serve your neighbor when you're holed up at home with the curtains pulled. It's hard to be God's people on earth when we think his work all takes place within these walls. No it doesn't. It takes place where you work, and where you play, and

where you go to relax, and where you serve. Salt is only useful when it is applied to something.

Today is LWML Sunday, and the mission of the LWML gets at the very heart of who we are as Christians and what we are as the church. The LWML exists to witness to Christ and serve our neighbors.

Remember the Samaritan woman at the well? Jesus shouldn't have been interacting with her according to the social norms of the day, yet he's in the world and seeking the lost, and so those two have quite the conversation. "If you knew the gift of God" Jesus said to her, "and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." "Give me this water," she responded to Jesus. But Jesus then confronted her about her numerous husbands and current live-in boyfriend. Jesus called her to repentance and faith. And she, in fact, believed. After Jesus "salted" her for life eternal, what did she do? John 4:28, "So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 'Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?'" Verse 39, "Many Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's witness." Christians bear witness to Jesus! It's part of being salt of the earth.

Now, the real art of reading the Bible is seeing yourself in all of these characters – see yourself in the saint, the sinner, the good, the bad and the ugly. *You* are the woman at the well! You are the one whose life does not square up with the demands of the Law. You deserve hell! You are the one whom Jesus calls to repentance! You are the one he forgives! You are the one he loves. You are the one he sends to witness to others. You are the one he sends out to serve others! You too are salt of the earth.

Where does this service take place? The work of the LWML reminds us that our witness takes place where God has put us – first and foremost in a family. You are the witness to your children. You are the

witness to your grandchildren. You are the witness to your siblings. That's why the LWML provides many resources and Bible studies to strengthen women in the faith. And from there, your witness is your circle of friends, this congregation, this community – just like the woman at the well.

Remember the Canaanite woman? She cried to Jesus, “Have mercy on me, O Lord . . . my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon” (Mt. 15:22ff.). Surprisingly, Jesus put her off. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs . . . I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She responded, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Luther says, “She had Him by the neck here.” And that’s okay with Jesus, for that’s why he came, to have mercy. He came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, for the Jews yes, but also for the Gentiles, for this Canaanite woman and for you and me. He loves to show mercy, not just for the soul but for our physical needs. It’s there throughout Scripture; there’s no escaping it. Caring for the physical needs of others is also what it means to be the salt of the earth. And this is also the salty practice of the LWML, with projects around the South Wisconsin District, around the nation, and around the world, providing hurricane relief, and care for unwed mothers and their children, fighting malaria, supporting crisis pregnancy centers. The list goes on and on, and in each case Jesus is being shared with those in need.

The Diamond Crystal Salt Company listed 101 uses for its salt. The modern salt industry lists over 14,000 uses of salt. You’ve been salted for service. You have salt in yourself. Think, therefore, about the unique gifts God has given you and where those gifts might intersect with the unique needs of those around you.

One last thing, and this again from Kurlansky’s book about salt. The French have an expression

regarding cheap cuts of meat. They like to say, “Everything that is not good asks to be salted.” (Salt, p. 237). “You are the salt of the earth.” “Everything that is not good asks to be salted.” Amen.

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