

**Sermon: Salt**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20**

My younger brother and I got up early one morning to make some oatmeal for breakfast. He was maybe three or four at the time which would have made me about eight years old. The instructions were on the box, I knew how to read, and we knew our way around the kitchen, so we got to work. We soon had a pot full of something that looked like oatmeal, and everything was fine until we got to the final ingredient: a pinch of salt.

We looked at each other – how big is a pinch of salt? We didn't know and there was no one around who could tell us, so we used the smallest measuring spoon that mom had; a quarter teaspoon, I think it was. One measure didn't look like enough, so we added another and maybe a third after that.

My recollection is that our mother laughed when she tried our oatmeal breakfast. The lesson we learned that day was, too much salt makes oatmeal inedible.

On the other hand, a modern-day, mass-produced can of soup tells you right on the label that the soup inside includes a lot of sodium, but you can barely tell. The lesson here is that the right amount of salt imperceptibly improves flavor.

Discretion is the better part of cooking, to coin a phrase.

Salt is found everywhere on the planet, as if God knew that everyone would need and benefit from it, and God made a lot of it.

Salzburg is a city on the northern edge of the Alps in Austria. Its name means 'salt town' and it's called that because it sits on an immense lump of salt, which is why there is a town there in the first place. Salt has been important for a long time. Celts were operating salt mines in Salzburg and in other places across Europe six or seven hundred years before Jesus.

Pure salt can do many things. The Diamond Crystal Salt Company once identified 101 uses for salt. It can purify; heal wounds; preserve foods; cleanse fabric and polish metal. It is important nutritionally, biologically, and economically. Fun fact: salt is the only rock we eat. Unsurprisingly, salt has important religious significance too.

Salt symbolizes the eternal nature of God’s covenant with Israel, ‘a covenant of salt forever, before the LORD,’ a covenant that can’t be broken because pure salt will always be salt (Numbers 18:19). This is because salt’s essence doesn’t change – you can dissolve it in water and then evaporate the water back into salt crystals, which makes it such a great symbol of loyalty and friendship.<sup>1</sup>

On the Sabbath, Jews dip bread – itself a gift from God – in salt, to symbolically preserve the underlying agreement between God and the covenant people.

Christians associate salt with longevity and permanence, implying wisdom and truth, which is why it makes such a great housewarming gift.

So, when Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth” – and not the salt of the sea – he tapped into a long tradition of meaning and understanding.

Why not the salt of the sea? Dead Sea salt was loaded with impurities and tasted awful if you dissolved the sodium chloride out of it, so forget that.

Can the salt of the earth lose its flavor, remembering that pure salt has no expiration date? You bet it can. If you dilute or dissolve it and then mix it with other compounds, it becomes impure and unusable. Salt in the first century was very often impure.

So, what does it mean that the *disciples* were the salt of the earth? Did Jesus imply they pure salt? Probably not, because Jesus wondered if lost saltiness could be restored.

He said this immediately after naming nine blessings. What we read today are the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe his remark is a pointed warning for the disciples to stay on track. They are good men, but they’ve only been following Jesus for a little while. It would be easy for them to return to their old way of life. Maybe Jesus wanted them to know that they have the responsibility to stay true to the mission, which he is about to explain. This is the challenge he proposed to them, to remain salt.

Then he said, “You are the light of the world.” Isaiah uses the imagery of light breaking forth like the dawn for those who choose the LORD’S fast – sharing their bread with the hungry, loosening the bonds of injustice, and so on. Jesus calls his disciples to choose the same fast proclaimed by Isaiah by doing and teaching the commandments.

Jesus also lets them know that discipleship demands dedication to the work, which is really just a response to God’s will, and are they up to the task?

In Isaiah, we have a case of divine exasperation. The people have returned from exile, they're trying to get things back to normal, but it's hard because everything has changed.

They think they know how to worship God, but God knows they have lost their way.

Yet, they seek God; they want to know God; they're trying to do what is right, but they're missing some key elements: righteousness and justice.

In their own exasperation, they ask, "Why should we bother doing any of this, LORD, if you're not watching?"

Does God need to watch? Maybe. God said, you're doing *this*, but this is what you *should* be doing. Isaiah said, if you choose the fast that God chooses, God will respond. If you change your ways, then things will be the way they should be.

On March 21, 1630, John Winthrop delivered a lecture at Holyrood Church in Southampton before his Massachusetts Bay colonists left England on the ship *Arbella* to settle Boston. He quoted Jesus saying, "a city on a hill cannot be hid," to warn his fellow Puritans that if they failed to uphold their covenant with God, then their sins and errors would be exposed for all the world to see. He wrote:

"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."<sup>2</sup>

Winthrop understood that the colony would go nowhere without God's grace and guidance, which was only forthcoming if they lived by the covenant. He made the point that:

"[The] only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one."<sup>3</sup>

As we know, salt prevents decay and protects from harm, as long as it remains salt, meaning that, "As long as we remain true to the Gospel — being salt, the true salt of the earth — we are what we should be, we are true to Christ's teaching."<sup>4</sup>

Mother Teresa once said that if you call yourself Christ's follower, you must always be Christlike, because you may be the only Gospel some people will ever read.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: A World History*, 7–8. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.winthropsociety.com/a-model-of-christian-charity>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <https://biltrix.com/2014/02/09/how-can-salt-lose-its-flavor/>