

Title: Embracing our Saltiness

Date: 2/5/2023 (Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 58:1-12](#); [1 Corinthians 2:1-12](#); [Matthew 5:13-20](#); [Psalm 112:1-9, \(10\)](#)

Video Link: https://youtu.be/omVC_Nz9R9Q?t=1293

O God, you have sent us the Spirit so that we may understand the gifts that you have bestowed upon us. In the coming days and months, grant us your power so that we begin to perceive that which we have not yet seen, nor heard, nor conceived. Amen.

How many of you, after hearing today's gospel, want to immediately pull out your phone and ask the internet, "How can salt lose its saltiness?"

Well, you can keep your phones where they are! I've already done this on your behalf.

As a testament to the power of effective branding, when I think of salt, my mind goes first to Morton Salt. I picture the dark blue label and the short-haired girl carrying an umbrella and wearing a bright yellow raincoat. According to their website, salt itself has no expiration date. However, salt products that contain iodine or other seasonings can deteriorate over time.¹

Turkey's largest salt exporter, Koyuncu Salt, points out that the very idea that salt can lose its saltiness comes from the Bible. They explain that salt, in its natural form, won't lose its saltiness or flavor. However, they acknowledge that if salt is mixed with additives or if it pulls in too much of the moisture in the air, that *will* affect the flavor.²

So, some Christians think that when Jesus is talking saltiness, he's talking about purity. They argue that we shouldn't let the world and all of its temptations dilute our faith.³ They claim that other ideologies and religions will only contaminate our knowledge of truth by planting seeds of doubt in our minds.⁴ So, we have to set ourselves apart and be very careful, otherwise our faith will no longer be able to preserve us, and the truths Jesus taught us will be rendered useless.

Their conclusion makes sense on the surface, but it doesn't sit right with me.

I trust that our faith isn't so easily diluted or contaminated.

A mature, or at least, maturing, faith calls for us to *expand* outward rather than draw inward. I believe that faith can help us engage more fully with the world and all its temptations. This is how we make this a better world for everyone to live in; this is how we deny those temptations power over us.

I believe that learning about other religions and ideologies can help us examine and strengthen our faith. Translating Buddhist lectures didn't cause me to lose my faith; the Eightfold Noble Path reflected for me the importance of practicing my faith in thought, word AND deed. I look forward to St. Alban's sharing an Iftar Ramadan Dinner in April with Dialogue Institute Austin.

We are called to grow and mature in our faith, and we can build our faith the way we build our muscles. Regularly placing a *healthy* amount of stress on our muscles can help us lift heavier weights over time, or at the very least, keep our muscles from getting weaker. I want to emphasize the word “healthy” because this isn’t about intentionally putting ourselves in dangerous or harmful situations.

That kind of healthy stress can come from regularly studying scripture and reading books that challenge us. It can come from perceiving and responding to the people and events around us through the lens of scripture.

If we are not careful, or maybe if we are, we may find ourselves choosing the kind of fast described by the prophet Isaiah, the kind of fast that calls us to “loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share [our] bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into [our] house,” to cover the naked and to NOT hide ourselves from our own kin (Isa 58:6-7).

Going back to the idea of salt and saltiness, in the context of the place and time Jesus was preaching, salt was valuable for many reasons. In a time without refrigerators, it helped preserve food.⁵ In a time when spices were expensive and hard to come by, it added flavor to the food.

You might have heard that the word “salary” is based on the Latin word for “salt.” Apparently, there *is* a debate on the internet (surprise, surprise) about whether Roman soldiers were ever really paid in salt or given money specifically to buy salt.⁶⁷ Whether this often repeated “fact” is actually a myth, that doesn’t take away from the idea that those listening to the Sermon on the Mount would have recognized salt as a commodity of great value.

So, Jesus isn’t talking about purity or purity of faith; he’s talking about something that gives us value. Saltiness is a metaphor for the spiritual gifts that we share with the world. When we lose sight of our spiritual gifts, when we don’t make use of them, it is as if we have thrown them out and trampled them underfoot.

When God sent us the Spirit, God lit that lamp within us. When God came to us in the form of Jesus, God showed us what it means to be the light of the world. God showed us what it looks like to let our light shine before others so they can see our good works and credit them to the grace and glory of God.

This is a light that shines even when we are poor in spirit, when we are mourning or when we are meek. This is a light that shines when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, when we are merciful and pure in heart, when we are peacemakers, or when we are persecuted for being in right relationship with God and our neighbors. It is an essential part of who we are; it makes us what we are.

Last week, I said that the Annual Meeting is a good time to ask the question, “What is our charism, what is the extraordinary gift given to St. Alban’s by the Holy Spirit for the

good of the church,⁸ for the good of South Austin and Buda and Kyle, for the folks moving in all around us?”

That charism, that extraordinary gift of the Spirit, is our particular brand of saltiness. It is the light of God, shining through us, refracted through the lens of those who make up St. Alban’s.

We’ve built and maintained this church on the hill, we’ve put this lamp on the lampstand, because we know we have something of value to share.

And as Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, this might not be proclaimed with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and the power, a sign that our faith does not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:4-5).

For some of you, it might actually be the gift of being salty in the house of God, to show that each of us can fully be ourselves here, fully known and fully loved. For some of you, it is the bread you bake, or the way you send off newcomers with bread. I met a professor at the Seminary of Southwest on Friday night, and when I told her I was from St. Alban’s, she immediately said, “Oh! The place with the bread!”

So, what is the spiritual gift, or gifts, that St. Alban’s has to offer to you who are here, and to those who haven’t found their way here yet?

How can our saltiness, our light, meet a deep spiritual need, which may look like a tangible, physical need, of the world around us today?

To be clear, these are NOT rhetorical questions. Tell me at Adult Education after the service. Fill out the Holy Cow survey. Chew on it, and then send me an email or a text or find a time to talk.

For us to preserve our saltiness, first we need to identify what our gift is, what our gifts are. For our light to shine bright from this hill, we need to talk about what it means for you, what you want to carry out into the world. It’d be great to come up with our equivalent of the Morton’s Salt label, a charism that is recognizably ours.

“Oh, you’re from St. Alban’s? St. Alban’s is a place where... The people of St. Alban’s are...”

To do all this, let us pray that God frees our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our heart and mind to conceive the spiritual gifts that are ours to nourish and to give away.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.mortonsalt.com/article/morton-salt-expiration-guide/>

² <https://koyuncusalt.com/en/salt-library/how-long-does-salt-keep-its-flavor>

³ https://www.harvestbiblechurch.net/content.cfm?page_content=blogs_include.cfm&friendly_name=loss-of-saltiness

⁴ <https://deneenwhite.com/2007/01/06/how-does-salt-lose-its-saltiness/>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2014/11/08/362478685/from-salt-to-salary-linguists-take-a-page-from-science>

⁶ <https://www.cooksinfo.com/roman-salt>

⁷ <http://kiwihellenist.blogspot.com/2017/01/salt-and-salary.html>

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charism>