

Pentecost 21B
Peace, Seattle
September 30, 2018
Mark 9:38-50

BEING SALT

The shopping list said **SALT**. And there was a time when that'd be one of the **easiest** items to pick up at the store. Just head to the baking aisle and reach for the blue cylinder. The only choice to make was whether you wanted the **iodized** or the **non-iodized** version.

Nowadays the choices are much more complicated.¹ Not only is there the standard variety **table salt**, you can choose from between a growing assortment of **other kinds**:

- Sea salt, kosher salt, pink salt—both Himalayan and Peruvian.
- Celtic gray salt, Indian black salt, Danish smoked salt, Cyprus salt flakes,
- and three kinds from the Hawaiian Islands alone: green salt, red salt, and black volcanic salt.

“Salts have exploded with popularity. What once was a simple decision...has become a sensory overload...a dazzling array of colors, textures and price points.”²

And it's not only **the color** that matters but **the place of origin** and **mineral content** that accompanies the sodium. **Who wouldn't want** salt on the table that comes from **ancient seabeds** in the Himalayan mountains; salt which contains **all 84 essential trace elements** required by the body; salt that can reduce muscle cramps and promote blood sugar health and healthy pH in your cells.

And who could resist the hand-raked variety of grey salt from coastal France, where “the natural clay and sand create moist, mineral-rich crystals”; salt that can “help restore electrolyte balance” and has “alkalizing properties”?

Then there are **the bragging rights** that derive from having exotic salts bedeck your dining table:

- **black salt**, whose beneficial digestive qualities derive from the presence of charcoal in its crystals;
- **smoky sea salt**, whose flavor derives from being smoked over a bed of coals;
- **Hawaiian red salt**, which boasts the highest concentration of essential minerals of any type;
- **and last but hardly least**, salt of the rarest **blue variety**, harvested from an ancient salt lake in Iran, extremely rich in minerals whose flavor is slightly—wait for it—**sweet**.

Who knew that so basic an element as sodium chloride could have so much caché?

And quite apart from its culinary qualities and other attributes, SALT is high in symbolic value.

Thirty-five years **before** Martin Luther King marched from Selma to Montgomery, Mohandas Gandhi led his followers on THE SALT MARCH, a 240-mile journey on the Indian subcontinent, from his spiritual retreat in Sabarmati to the small village of Dandi on the Arabian Sea.

The march was a protest aimed specifically at the injustice of Britain's colonial laws, which forbade Indians from producing or selling their own salt.³

¹ This take on salt was inspired by Rachel Keefe's *Living by the Word* article in *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-30-ordinary-26b-mark-938-50>

² *Nine Different Kinds of Salt: Which Is the Healthiest?* <https://www.ecowatch.com/9-different-kinds-of-salt-which-is-the-healthiest-1891079937.html> The specific descriptions and information regarding salt types in the paragraphs that follow derive from this article.

³ See the article by Johnny Simon and Benjamin Landy, some of which I include here in edited form. <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/inside-gandhis-salt-march-the-nonviolent-journey-changed-the-world-discussions> 03/12/15.

Leaning on his walking stick, dressed in his homespun clothes, Gandhi and his followers walked for 24 days toward the sea, and with each passing day an increasing number of people joined their salt sat-ya-gra-ha or nonviolent protest.

When they arrived at the coast, a crowd of thousands watched as Gandhi and his followers deliberately broke the law by evaporating seawater to make their own salt. This simple act of civil disobedience set off a chain reaction of mass demonstrations and acts of noncompliance throughout the country, leading to the arrest of tens of thousands.⁴

But the protest accomplished its purpose. It loosened Britain's colonial grip by showing the world the paternalistic injustice that lies at the root of all colonialism. The unfairness of the salt laws—like the racial segregation of Montgomery buses in the Jim Crow South—were visible for everyone to see.⁵

SALT is on the table in today's gospel, too.

It all starts with John who, pulling on Jesus' sleeve like a school-aged tattler, calls out someone who's been performing good works in Jesus' name without permission.

WE TRIED TO STOP HIM BECAUSE HE WASN'T ONE OF US, John says.

Maybe John and the others were trying to prove their loyalty to Jesus. Maybe they were just guarding their turf—after all, not just any Tom, Dick, or Harry could go about dropping Jesus' name, could they?

But instead of congratulating them, Jesus tells them not to count others as enemies so quickly. **WHOEVER ISN'T AGAINST US IS FOR US**, he says.

Too often in church and in society we operate with a bunker mentality. We assume that any who are not part of our denomination or cause or party are rivals or even enemies.

How quickly we who feel “closest” to Jesus, closest to “the truth,” assume the role of gatekeeper. When we feel it's our job to make our neighbors into people who think and feel and pray like we do, then we've missed the boat.

The story from Numbers makes a similar point. When the spirit of prophesy comes to Eldad and Medad by a different route than the others, Joshua calls them out for prophesying without a license and he insists that Moses stop them.

WOULD THAT ALL THE LORD'S PEOPLE WERE PROPHETS WITH THE LORD'S SPIRIT IN THEM! Moses retorts. If old Moses, well seasoned in the ways of leadership, has learned anything during faith's turbulent journey it's not to quash the Spirit of God when it's at work!

When we start judging the worthiness or unworthiness of other people to be engaged in God's mission to heal the world, we run the danger of becoming the very stumbling blocks that Christ warns against.

Which brings us back to SALT. EVERYONE, Jesus tells us, WILL BE SALTED WITH FIRE.

⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/india/salt-march>

⁵ Op. cit. Simon and Landy.

On Thursday America became captive to a spectacle, a cultural moment—perhaps a watershed one—as we sat glued to screens and radios listening to the voices of [Christine Blasey Ford](#) and [Brett Kavanaugh](#).⁶

Speaking to an audience of millions from that crowded Senate hearing room, each of them claimed, without a shadow of a doubt, that their testimony was 100% right and true.

Did any of us come away NOT feeling like we had been salted with fire?

I feel compassion for the families, for whom this whole affair must feel like a one-way ticket into hell.

No matter whose testimony you felt was more authentic, whose demeanor more believable, there are no winners. The whole situation is fraught. And the damage to the process, to the institutions of our nation, to the notion that one nation could dare to call itself “indivisible,” is bound to remain with us not only through this election cycle but for generations to come.

If there’s a silver lining at all, it may come from those women who, having experienced sexual trauma themselves, now feel emboldened to name it publicly for the first time.

This story isn’t over yet. We’re promised yet more drama as the FBI steps in to investigate while the full Senate vote on Kavanaugh’s nomination looms on the horizon.

It feels like our country, our democracy, and our institutions—so obviously divided—are losing their saltiness. And when that happens, how can they possibly be restored?

The truth is, the Christian community, too—across the world and in this nation—is deeply divided and has been from nearly the beginning. Recent political developments have only helped to show those divisions in greater relief.

There is a cost to these divisions, there are consequences to this truth, which is causing little ones the world over to stumble on the whole idea of faith and trust in God.

Whose God? Which God? The one you’ve made into your image, or the one I’ve made into mine?

There are no ready solutions. Once salt loses its flavor, how can that flavor, those qualities return?

When our first impulse is to divide ourselves into camps; to raise our flag and lay claim to our position as the only legitimate one, then there can be no room for dialog.

**That’s what Joshua wanted to do, and Moses said NO.
That’s what John wanted to do, and Jesus forbade it.**

In his final word on the subject, for this week anyway, Jesus holds SALTINESS and PEACE together. HAVE SALT IN YOURSELVES, AND BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER, he says.

Having salt and being at peace are not, in Jesus’ way of thinking, mutually exclusive.

⁶ Learn more here: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/christine-blasey-ford-brett-kavanaugh-hearing-sexual-assault-allegations-top-takeaways/>

The genius of Gandhi's non-violent approach to resistance and protest was that it not only awakened the inner strength and value of the image of God within, it served as a mirror reflecting to British overlords their brutality and the inhumane attributes of an empire which, like all empires, claimed a divine right to rule those whom God and nature had deemed lesser than themselves.

Gandhi's methods of satyagraha—which literally means “devotion to the truth”—put the lie to British assumptions about power and divine right, and ultimately paved the way for Indian independence.

I believe this story from history helps to illuminate what Jesus is saying to his apostles and to us when he holds salt and peace together in the gospel.

Christ's words serve simultaneously as invitation and warning.

In the words of Rachael Keefe:

“When enough of us fail to be who we were created to be, the body of Christ is in danger of becoming saltless salt. And if we lose our salt, we lose our identity, our purpose, our value.

[Then] the church becomes like so much sand. The world does not need more sand.

The world needs salt—[salt of all kinds]—to enhance flavors, to preserve food that will nurture us in the days to come, to keep us vital...”⁷

...especially in times like these when the world is in danger of losing its moorings.

You are the salt of the Earth, says Jesus. Guard it. Spread it. Treasure it. Use it.

Bring to your places and spaces in my name the kind of peace the world cannot give. And a taste of God's reign that's worth savoring no matter what comes.

Amen.

⁷ Op. cit., Rachael Keefe, *Christian Century*.

Jesus wasn't referring to my salt collection when he spoke to his disciples. But it's what I picture when I read this text. I see the church as all the different kinds of salt. You see where I'm going, don't you? It doesn't matter if you are the old blue canister of iodized salt or if you are regular sea salt or smoked salt or salt of a different color. You can't shove one off the shelf or stop being salty. You are salt. I am salt. We have a job to do. To do it best we have to recognize our own saltiness and the saltiness of those who share the shelf. Then we have to live in peace with one another.

Wouldn't it be great if the church went on a high-sodium diet and we learned to value every variety of salt for what it contributes to the sacred pallet? - *Rachael Keefe Christian Century*