

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 58: 7-10

Psalms 112: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Corinthians 2: 1-5

Matthew 5: 13-16

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“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” One of the things that people find perplexing about these words of Our Lord from today’s Gospel is their implicit assertion that it is possible for salt to lose its taste. It’s hard to imagine how this could ever happen. After all, common table salt, sodium chloride, is a chemical compound that will taste salty now and forever unless through some chemical reaction it becomes another compound altogether. It’s either salt or it isn’t, and if it is, it will taste like it. So, what could Jesus mean by salt that has lost its taste?

Preachers have come up with all sorts of answers to this question. For instance, some have claimed that of course Jesus knows it would be unnatural for salt to lose its flavor. His point is that it would be *just* as unnatural for his followers to fail to glorify God by their lives. That’s a possible explanation, I guess.

The solution I like best suggests that what was called salt in Our Lord’s time and place was in fact a white powder mined in the region of the Dead Sea that contained a number of compounds, including sodium chloride. If the powder got wet after it was mined, the salt would dissolve out leaving a tasteless white powder that was literally good for nothing. For all intents and purposes, the “salt” had lost its taste.

Because of the ambiguity in Jesus' words, preachers in every time and place have based their remarks on whatever associations salt had for them and for their congregations – which seems fair enough. So, what do we think of when we think of salt? The first thing that comes to my mind is a *New Yorker* magazine cover (1/27/14). The cover refers to the heavy snowfalls New York City had been experiencing. It depicts a mustachioed chef wearing a scarf and earmuffs along with his white smock and chef's hat. He is standing outside his restaurant and has just finished clearing the sidewalk of snow. Now he is delicately sprinkling the sidewalk with a pinch of salt from a small cup he holds in one hand. If the chef were simply salting his sidewalk, the joke would work. But in fact, the cover is referring to a phenomenon sweeping the culinary world: *finishing salt*.

Gourmets, gourmands, and the chefs who cater to them have discovered that all salt is not the same. Salts mined in different places by different means have distinctive trace elements, moisture content and textures that can enhance the flavor of dishes prepared with them. The idea is to sprinkle a bit of the perfect salt onto a dish immediately before serving - a bit like the chef on the magazine cover does with his sidewalk. Remarkably, this brings us back to the Dead Sea, which is the source of some of the finest, most sought after finishing salts of all.

So what if we Christians are the finishing salts of the earth? Each of us a child of God possessed of the same Holy Spirit, but each of us distinctive because of where we have come from and the experiences that have brought us to this place. God's loving plan for each of us has brought us into circumstances suited to our particular qualities. Now let's trust the recipe, and the chef, and glorify God by our lives.