

November 9th: “If the Salt Loses its Saltiness, How Can it Be Made Salty Again?”

Welcome, my friends, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions and answers. As we know, Jesus was forty times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer, so in these ten weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at ten conversations that Jesus had with the people of his time. This series is intended to challenge us and form us to be more like Jesus, so it is my hope this morning that this meditation will give us some wisdom about how to live out these ancient truths in our own modern era.

We're now in the third month of this series, so if you've missed previous sermons, be sure to check out our website—all our sermon manuscripts are posted so that you can go back and catch up, or reread a message that resonated deeply with you. These are resources for you to use as we continue this process of dissecting and discerning together.

Before we prepare to discuss another question that Jesus addressed, I invite you to take a deep breath, and pray with me.

Challenging God, you call us into spaces and places that push us out of our comfort zones. You call us into roles and responsibilities that push our society towards greater wholeness and reconciliation. You equip us with the power to transform the world like mustard seeds—we may be small on our own, but together we flourish into a giant community. Remind us this morning that this work requires us to be both soft and strong, tender and truthful. Speak to us in this time of reflection so that we can approach this new week with the wisdom and courage that we are searching for. Amen.

When I'm all out of ideas for what to cook—I make this Indian inspired dish called Chana Saag from a recipe site called Budget Bytes. I'm sure there's more authentic versions out there, but this one is simple and doesn't require any extra trips to find specialty ingredients. I'll put the link up on the screen in

case you're also looking for a delicious meal with fiber, protein, and veggies all in one pot.

However, I want to warn you: the first few times I made it, more than a decade ago, I was underwhelmed by the flavors. It wasn't quite bland, but it was exactly as flavorful as I had imagined. It was savory and slightly spiced thanks to the ginger, curry powder, and garlic, but it lacked something. It needed something added to it, but I couldn't figure out exactly what. The next time I made it, I tried more garlic—and although I think the limit does not exist when it comes to garlic, this didn't solve the problem. A few weeks later, I tried adding in a different curry powder—this one more potent than the last. It was good, but it wasn't the answer. Finally, I accidentally more than tripled the amount of salt—the recipe calls for $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon, and wasn't thinking and put in three full teaspoons instead. Well, what could have been an error turned out to be the result I was looking for—all of a sudden this bland dish was bright and punchy! The salt perfectly brought out the flavors of the spices, and it made the curry broth rich and intense. It drew out the earthiness of the chickpeas, and tempered some of the acid from the tomatoes. It was perfect. And so now I make it that way every time.

I've also learned that I'm not alone in preferring a large amount of salt in my foods—I got into some cooking shows during COVID, and I was amazed at the amount of salt that some professional chefs add to their cuisine. Truly, it was shocking to see handfuls of salt, sometimes even fistfuls, disappear into pasta water or to watch as heaps of flaky sea salt were sprinkled onto finished dishes. But this isn't for show—it's on purpose. And this is because salt plays a vital role in the science of cooking—it's a crucial part of how flavors and textures come together.

Now, obviously this advice isn't going to work if you have high blood pressure or if your doctor has recommended a low sodium diet. Definitely follow their professional opinion if that applies to you! But even if your food has lost some of its saltiness, that doesn't mean that your faith has to—in fact, Jesus seems to

think it's very important that his disciples continue to be what he calls "the salt of the earth."

Before we get more into what Jesus might mean by that, let's take a closer look at the cultural context of this time period and how that historical information might have impacted these conversations.

In biblical times, salt was even more important than it is today. In addition to flavoring food, salt was used to preserve perishables, protect against spoiling, and store items safely. Because of these many uses, salt was a valuable commodity, and we see in historical sources that salt was sometimes used as payment or compensation—we actually get the modern world "salary" from the Latin word "*salarium*," meaning "salt money." In many biblical contexts, we see that salt often represents a gift or tool—it was given as part of offerings to God as a way of expressing thanks, it was used by physicians to pack wounds and prevent infection, and it was used in civic and religious rituals as a reminder of promises that were made.

So it's not unheard of that salt would be a topic of conversation between Jesus and his audience. It makes sense that it appears as an illustration or metaphor within our biblical text, because it would have been a recognizable item or idea for this ancient population.

That brings us to Matthew 5, a passage that sits within a larger dialogue that biblical scholars call "The Sermon on the Mount." In this extended teaching moment, Jesus covers a number of topics, including this idea of what it means to his disciple. This particular piece of the sermon comes at the beginning, it's like Jesus is setting up his larger vision before going into greater detail. After Jesus tells his disciples that they are "the salt of the earth," he continues by saying, "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

At first glance, this doesn't make a ton of sense, at least not to me. How could salt no longer be salty? How could it lose its saltiness? All of the cooking

content that I watched didn't mention that salt could spoil or go bad—so what is Jesus talking about?

I don't think Jesus is necessarily speaking literally here, at least not in the way we might expect. I don't think he's giving us a cooking demonstration about salt that has somehow lost its flavoring. However, it is clear that he's asking the disciples to consider something outside of their comfort zone—he's asking a question that bends their perspective a little bit. And because the question is slightly absurd, it means that Jesus might be looking for his followers to also think differently too—not necessarily in an illogical way, more so in an amusing way. In the event that salt actually became tasteless and not-salty, what would we even use it for? We probably wouldn't add it to food, we wouldn't use it as a preservative, and we definitely wouldn't turn it into money. If salt wasn't salty, it would lose all of its purpose and value. It would lose all its distinctiveness and particularity.

Jesus argues, at least indirectly, that the same is true for his followers.

What do I mean by that? Well, in a recent sermon given by my colleague Scott at Community UMC in Port Hadlock, he talked about the dangers of what he calls “Low-Sodium Christianity.” Not only is that a really catchy title for a sermon, but his words really resonated with me—because he's absolutely right that our religion as a whole has the potential to become so watered down that it becomes basically meaningless. He calls out the kind of faith that is just bland and almost tasteless—meaning that it has no real depth or distinctive qualities. It's all surface level, with very little substance or passion behind it. It's lacking any potency or conviction. It's nice, but it's not meaningful. It's vaguely comforting, but it's not transformative. It's sentimental, but it's not powerful.

It reminds me of the passage in the Book of Revelation, where a letter is written to the church in the ancient city of Laodicea—naming their seeming inability to recognize their own mediocrity and foolishness. In that text, our biblical author writes, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I

wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Whew, harsh words, right?!

But how could our faith get this way? How might our personal beliefs and convictions lose their saltiness? How might we be tempted to become “lukewarm” as Christians? As I thought about this topic this past week, I settled on three different answers.

First, our faith becomes less salty when we believe that following Jesus is only about a personal decision, not a communal action that involves significant responsibility. Yes, faith in Jesus is a choice that each of us makes, but it doesn’t stop there, it’s not all about me me me. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about his vision for the Kingdom of God—what it looks like for all of creation to be part of this redemption and renewal. It isn’t just about individual people experiencing love and transformation—it’s about the entire world being transformed.

So that means that our vision for faith has to look bigger than just ourselves. It has to be about more than just our own plan to go to heaven. A salty faith that extends beyond our own salvation includes a vision for a better city, nation, and world—it imagines tangible ways that we can decrease suffering and increase compassion. A salty faith works toward interpersonal healing, systemic justice, and institutional change—because it knows that this new and liberated reality is God’s ultimate plan. A salty faith invites to dream big, give big, serve big, and live big.

Second, our faith becomes less salty when we reduce our spiritual practice to Sunday mornings. If this is the only hour each week where you’re engaging with God or the Bible, that means that there are 167 other hours where your life is focused on other things. And yes, sleeping, working, caring for your family, all of that is important—but there might be other things you’re worshiping with your time that you’re not even aware of. If you spend one

hour per week in church, but three hours per night watching the news, that activity is having a much bigger impact on your discipleship than what goes on here. If you spend one hour in worship, but ten hours scrolling Facebook—that's where your energy and attention is going. Your time is showing you what you value.

By contrast, a salty faith permeates our whole lives—every hour of every day. That doesn't mean hundreds of hours reading scripture, or spending every waking minute in prayer, but it does mean that the values and priorities of Jesus inform all of our actions, from the smallest to the largest. Salty faith means that our discipleship, our desire to follow Jesus, guides our decision making, influences our behavior, and helps us continually grow. Salty faith means that we take time throughout the week for true rest, connection with God, and service to others. A salty faith means that we choose to prioritize media, activities, relationships, and spiritual practices that get us closer to God, not further away.

Finally, our faith becomes less salty when we're afraid of conflict or shy away from what really matters. If we are more concerned with seeming impartial than with addressing inequality and injustice, we have lost the plot. If followers of Jesus play it safe and do anything to keep the peace, we lose the inherent leadership and truth telling that we have to offer. If we try to avoid taking sides, even in the face of blatant oppression and cruelty, we'll miss out on what makes our faith unique and powerful. In Matthew 5, we see that our faith has something important to say to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, and the persecuted. Our modern faith should have something to say too!

Jesus shows us that true faith often confronts the issues and realities of its time—leading us to a better way of being and living. In his own day, Jesus gets into fights with Pharisees, overthrows tables in the temple, and has pointed words for people who are apathetic and passive. By contrast, salty faith challenges our internal indifference and calls out our communal disinterest—it pushes us to leave behind our desire to not rock the boat or go along to get

along. Salty faith requires us to be attentive to the vulnerable and marginalized in our society, especially when they are suffering at the hands of the rich and powerful. A salty faith doesn't just accept things the way they are, it empowers us to be forces of positive change in our world.

To sum it all up, Pastor Scott said it best: "The 'salty' Christian does not tolerate low sodium Christianity."

If you're noticing that your own faith is feeling a little less salty than you'd like—there's no need to panic. There are ways to increase your spiritual salt, and I'm going to list a few in case you need ideas.

To help you see the bigger picture, learn about what Christian faith and practice looks like in another part of the globe. Explore a larger systemic issue, and do some research about how you might see its effects in our context. Read about people who courageously carried God's vision into their communities—people like John Wesley, Florence Nightingale, Dorothy Day, Harold Moody, Sojourner Truth, Jane Goodall, or Father Oscar Romero, or any of the saints that are hung around our walls.

To add more spirituality into your week, dedicate a few minutes to reading your Bible, pick up a devotional book by a Christian author, listen to an uplifting podcast instead of doomscrolling, or go for a walk to notice the beauty of the changing leaves. Put on worship music during your commute, try out a new form of prayer as part of your evening routine, or donate your time to a cause that you care about.

And lastly, to become bolder like Jesus, write to your representatives, vote in an upcoming election, advocate for a need that you see in our city. Notice and call out racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia when you see it, don't just sit back and ignore harm being done to our neighbors. Look up what to do if ICE agents threaten your neighbor, or organize with your friends and family to protest against something you disagree with. Participate in mutual aid, build

community in your neighborhood, or just practice stepping outside of your comfort zone.

All of these things can help us live out a faith that is more than just lip service. All of these actions can help us create a lifelong spiritual journey that goes beyond what is superficial or trite. All of these choices can get us closer to preserving what makes our religion truly holy and sacred.

My friends, Jesus calls his disciples the “salt of the earth” for a reason, and he’s calling you that too. He’s calling us to be fed up with apathy and indifference. He’s calling us to be leaders who illuminate a better way. He knows that you are capable of immense saltiness, so let’s put it to good use this week.

Amen.