“Salt-Shakers!”

The Rev. David Jordan-Haas
Matthew 5:13-16
March 30th 2014
In our Sunday worship for most of March-into-April, up to Palm Sunday, we are highlighting the essential third part of our three-part Mission Statement, “Becoming Like Christ, Together, FOR THE WORLD.” What does it look like for all of us to be stand-out, Christ-like neighbors? What does it look like to be Jesus-followers with bite, with influence, such that we would change our neighborhoods—that we would change the world? Our Scripture this morning shows us that Jesus believes that we can be “game-changers” for the world!

Salt-Shakers and Light-Houses—that’s who Jesus is calling His disciples to be! I’m only going to focus on being Salt-Shakers this morning. Here are some things about salt. Over 25 years ago, I married into a family, Connie’s family, and the joke goes, that they love salt so much that they would even “salt a salt lick!” Don’t ever have just one salt shaker at the table (and forget passing the pepper); one salt shaker at every place setting is what works best for the Jordans! And unsalted butter, at the dinner table! Don’t you dare!

Do you know that we all need to eat salt to survive? Actually, we would die if we didn’t eat this “rock” called “Sodium Chloride.” The average person eats more than 4,000 milligrams of salt a day. Doctors say that 1,500 milligrams a day is plenty. Surprisingly, only eight percent of our salt production is actually for putting in our food and sprinkling on our food. By far, the largest single-most use of American salt, 51 percent, is for de-icing NoVa roads!

But I digress. What kind of “salt-shaker” is Jesus calling us to be? This is Dale Bruner’s translation of this passage from Matthew’s Gospel. It’s part of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” and we begin at verse 13: “You folks are the very salt of the earth!” Catch that? Jesus addresses His disciples NOT as sole individuals but as “you folks,” as a collective plural. Jesus sees us as one body, together, as a united front on a united mission. His deepest desire is for us together to be loyal to Him (to remain stuck to him) in order to be used by Him to help people.

“You folks are the very salt of the earth!” “You folks”—meaning Jesus’ small, misfit group of disciples—are the very salt of the entire world. Jesus is calling them not only to be the very salt of a 30-mile radius known as “Palestine” or “Galilee.” Jesus is charging His disciples to establish a global ministry (and in those ancient days without the use of
planes, trains, and automobiles, and TWEETS!). Alone, they (we) don’t stand a chance to be as salty as Jesus wants us to be. But together, in community, it’s possible. One miniscule speck of salt won’t cut it; but instead, shake us all out—the whole salt-shaker—and see what happens!

Matthew 5:13-16: “You folks are the very salt of the earth! But if that salt loses its tang, how is it ever going to be salty again? It is absolutely useless except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You folks are the very light of the world! A city sitting on a hill cannot easily be hid. People do not light a lamp to put it under a bucket! Oh no! They put it right up on the lampstand where it shines for everyone in the house. So you folks let your light shine out in the presence of other people in such a way that when they see your kind of good works they will give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

So, why in the world is Jesus comparing us to salt? I believe there are three essentials to salt and, thus, three essentials to being Jesus’ disciples: Salt is distinct. Salt prevents decay. Third, salt flavors.

First, salt is distinct. The most obvious characteristic of salt is that it is absolutely different from that into which it is put. In other words, salt’s power lies precisely in its difference! Eggs without salt shaken on them, nope; but eggs with salt on them, yes; tastier. As Christians, our potency, our influence on society depends on (our) being distinct, not identical. So a question: Are we really living and being and acting differently from the culture around us? Is our seasoning flavor; is our look truly different, or are we just blandly blending in? Are we catching people’s attention by what we are doing and saying, such that people may see Jesus in us? Author and pastor Sally Lloyd-Jones writes that, “The glory of the gospel is that, when Christ’s Church is distinctively different from the world, She invariably attracts it.”

Two members of our VPC family gave me permission to share what’s happening in their lives. Over several months of prayer and discernment, the husband recently took early retirement and stepped away from a successful, well-paying job in order to serve older, aging adults in our community. He’s now giving time at the Shepherd Center and here in our own caring ministries. This huge decision has necessitated lifestyle changes for the whole family. But, as the husband said to me, they got to a place where they simply “couldn’t help themselves but be led by God to
help God’s people!” They realized that there was a greater purpose to their lives than attaining a certain professional status or degree of financial success.” This “salt of the earth” family is a family daring to live different-ly, because they love Jesus and are trying to follow Him more and more.

So, salt is distinct. Second, salt prevents decay. Salt keeps things from going bad. Before the days of refrigeration, salt was extremely valuable for preserving food and preventing decay. Salt keeps food from going bad, turning rancid! Every week we’re able to read about the next company, or celebrity, or athlete that has “gone bad” because of their actions or their choices. They could have used some salty guys to have helped prevent things or lives from going bad (examples: Pete Rose, Oscar Pistorius, Chris Christie). Lives have been tarnished. Integrity has been lost. Things go bad.

We are no different. Every day we make choices that will either promote decay or prevent decay. We can stop things from going bad by doing something as seemingly small as not participating in gossip at the proverbial office water cooler, or church hall, or at the neighborhood school bus stop. We can stop things from going bad by something as seemingly small as speaking up when that off-color joke is told in the locker room or cafeteria. Or maybe it’s as purposeful as doing our part to fight global hunger by putting out our money and/or our time for this Saturday’s Stop Hunger Now event. Or maybe it’s joining a committed group of people here at VPC who are wanting to do something about the growing, alarming numbers of 12 to 16 year old girls (boys, too), living right here in northern Virginia, who are being groomed and exploited for the sex trafficking market across the country. Prevent decay. Keep things from going bad. This is what it means to be salt for the world, right here, right now.

Salt is distinctive. Salt prevents decay. Third, salt flavors. To the churches in and around what is now the Turkish city of Colossae, the apostle Paul wrote: “Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders….Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (4:5-6). We are meant to shake our salt, to season and flavor our speech (and our actions). People ought to know we are salty Christians in the way we treat a store clerk, in the way we order a meal at a restaurant, in the way we treat our employees or serve our employer. People ought to know we are salty Christians in the way
we drive our car, or the daily language we use, or the things we read, or music we listen to. People ought to know we are Salt-Shaker Christians by what we say and do.

In 1952, Bible scholar William Barclay wrote this: “A Christian should be just as much a Christian in the factory, the shipyard, the schoolroom, the surgery, or the kitchen, the golf course, the playing field (just as much a Christian) as s/he is in church.” Barclay goes on, “Jesus did not say, ‘You are the salt and light of the Church’; Jesus said, ‘You are the salt and light of the world,’ and in a person’s life, in the world, his/her Christianity should be evident to all” (Matthew’s Commentary, p.123).

Be distinctively salty by making small or big choices of godly significance every day. Be salt by choosing an area where we see decay and take action. Be salt by using our words and actions to bless others. Season and flavor the lives of our neighbors with God’s goodness and kindness.

“Don’t lose your saltiness,” Jesus says to us. “If you don’t stay salty you will be useless to me, [He says] and you will be useless to the world.” When He said this to His disciples Jesus knew His time on earth was running out. Everything was at stake. Jesus knew that living out the Gospel would now depend on His followers keeping their saltiness. So how do you and I keep salty? By sticking close to Jesus! By sticking close to Jesus, like salt on pretzels; like salt on corn-on-the-cob; like salty pea-nuts! Stick with Jesus by keeping up with the daily, weekly rhythms that keep you close to Him and to one another—worship, prayer, reflecting on Scripture, music, alone-time, rest-time, play-time, serve-time, give time!

Here’s the truth: Salt just a centimeter away from food is useless to the food. In the same way, Christians who love Jesus, but who don’t share that love with those on the outside looking in are like useless salt. Jesus is asking you and me to be the salt of the earth, to have bite and grit to change the world—to become like Christ, together, for the world! Nothing will please Jesus more than by us being willing to “salt a salt lick”—to be shaken and poured out in His name, for His sake, and for the world.