

17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21B
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Psalm 19:7-14
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
September 27, 2009

Being in a book group can teach you a thing or two about living in community. You have to learn to honor a variety of opinions and perspectives. You have to learn to *give way* to each other at times— and that *can* become an issue when it comes to choosing what book to read next. Now, I dearly love to read fiction, but we've got a lot of non-fiction readers in the group. So I can learn... I can read non-fiction when I have to, I can give way, I can try not to complain...

However, I have to say the all-time low point for me was when our First Immanuel book group ended up reading a non-fiction book called Salt: A World History (by Mark Kurlansky). I mean, it was a whole entire book... about salt. 498 pages... about salt. The history of salt, the influence of salt in history. Salt mines, salt prices, salt taxes, salt in China, France, India. I've never encountered so many obscure references to salt! We all decided that a little bit of salt goes a long way.

Jesus had a few things to say about salt in today's scripture – rather obscure things, actually. “Everyone will be salted with fire.” “Have salt in yourselves.” “If salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?” What does all of this mean?

It takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus told his followers they were like salt. Remember: “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” (Mt 5:14)

It turns out that salt is necessary for human life, in a chemical and biological sense. We also need salt for our diet. As a seasoning, salt brings out the flavor in food. As a preservative, it's used to cure meat and preserve fish. Back before refrigeration, you had to have salt to preserve your food supply through the seasons.

Now, salt that is pure can't lose its flavor. But when it's impure and mixed with other compounds, it can take on a nasty taste. So when Jesus tells us to “have salt in ourselves,” he is urging us to keep our pure and distinctive flavor as Christians. To let the essence of faith shine through. To be different from the crowd because of the way we reflect God's presence and character.

We are “the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. There might not be many of us – there sure weren't many in Jesus' time – but a little bit of salt goes a long way. When we're true to our calling, we salt-of-the-earth people have the ability to *preserve life* around us. We can flavor the whole human race. And just as people need salt to stay alive, so the human family needs Christ's followers to be bold, distinctive, and flavorful.

So, what flavor are we?

Scripture gives us an idea of what behaviors and attitudes go along with being the “salt of the earth.” Our readings for today are a great place to start. They name some qualities that are what someone called the bread and butter of Christian life. (Fred Craddock) That is, the everyday things that are just what people do when they belong to Christ. The salty way of living. Let’s roam around our scriptures and notice what makes Christ’s people distinctive and flavorful.

Our Old Testament text reminds of something simple and basic: God’s people value community.

Moses learned it when he and the Israelites were wandering around in the desert before they reached the Promised Land. Wandering and whining. The people whined because they were tired of eating manna every day. Moses whined to God about the people who were whining to him. “Did I give birth to these cry-babies, God? How do you expect me to carry them all by myself?!” It’s pretty amusing, really, because we can see ourselves in Moses – how strung out we get when we try to do everything all by ourselves. And we can appreciate what a gracious thing it was that God gave Moses a community to share the load. God raised up 70 elders to help Moses lead the people, and God gave them God’s Spirit, God’s breath, God’s presence, to sustain them.

Christians, like Moses, have learned the value of community. They don’t try to go it alone, in faith or in life. Christians see right through the American myth of rugged individualism and know we can’t survive if we live “every man for himself.” Being salt-of-the-earth people means knowing we need each other, we belong to each other, and God gives us to one another as a gift.

Which leads me to another distinctive flavor of salt-of-the-earth people: we stay open to the Spirit’s work, always. In everyday interactions, we watch for the hand of God at work.

This time I direct your attention to our gospel lesson, another amusing story. The disciples objected when they saw a man who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. The problem was, “He’s not one of us” -- so they tattled on him to Jesus. But Jesus saw something more happening there. He saw God’s hand working in the outsider, and in anyone else who was the least bit open to him and his message. And Jesus spoke a gracious word: “Whoever isn’t against us is *for us*.” It’s beautiful that in a time when people were taking sides -- many taking sides against Jesus – that Jesus would have the faith to say: keep the door open, don’t shut anyone out.

The word for us is — stay open. Suspend judgment. Stay open to how the Spirit is moving in the people around you, even outside the official boundaries of Christian community. Remember that we never have the corner on God’s truth. God is at work every-

where, especially where we least expect. As salt-of-the-earth people, we are not close-minded but expectant. As we interact with all kinds of people, we watch for what God is growing in them. If they're not against us, they may be for us, and for our God who created them and loves them, and is *for them*, whether they realize it or not. We live by the conviction that God's Spirit is flowing, freely, generously, all the time. Salt-of-the-earth people are open.

And salt-of-the-earth people are prayerful. The book of James says it beautifully. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you rejoicing? Pray. If there's anything that is the bread and butter of Christian life, it's our practice of prayer. Prayer is our lifeline. It's what keeps us open to God. It sets us apart as distinctive.

And beyond this, Christians are distinctive because we don't just pray for ourselves. We pray for others. We believe God's healing power is real. We don't claim to understand how God's power moves, so we stand before the mystery of how prayer operates. But in trust, in humility, and in hope we are bold to lift up any and all who are in need, before God in prayer.

I see how bold this congregation is in praying for others. Our prayer chain is always brimming with needs. Just a click of the keyboard and you can receive an email list of those we are praying for. You will be amazed by how wide the net is cast, by how readily our members bring every need of friend or family or coworker to this prayer ministry. You will be amazed how much pain there is in the world – and how beautiful it is that Christians don't respond to pain with bitterness or despair but with outreaching love and trust and hope, bearing it together, placing it before God -- in faith that God's own love is lavished into those very places of pain.

Praying for others is one of the ways that we "have salt in ourselves" and practice peace with all God's children.

Both James and Jesus say that salt-of-the-earth Christians are to be rigorous in opposing sin – especially the sin that lives within themselves. There's that fiery language about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes – notice, our own eyes, not those of other people! It's a call to examine ourselves and to be vigilant against anything that stands in the way of our relationship to God. Christians take sin seriously. Whether it's a gambling problem or a jealousy problem, we are called to pay attention to whatever can separate us from God and be destructive to life. It goes without saying that this isn't something the general public concerns itself with. It is a distinctive mark of belonging to Jesus.

James says too that Christians will confess their sin to each other and speak forgiveness to each other. That is, we will never be left to battle sin alone. God has provided

for us. God has forgiven us through Christ and has formed us into a community of forgiveness.

Confession happens among us whenever we are able to be honest and vulnerable about our failings, one to another. And when we are able to pray for each other and bring God's forgiveness to each other. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have safe places where I could be truthful with other people about who I am, my failings and my doubts, my struggles and my needs.

This is what Christian friendships are for. They are places where we can be honest, confess in humility, and receive the love of Christ in response. Nowhere but the Christian community will you find this gift.

Finally, salt-of-the-earth people are called to care for the "little ones" – that is, those who are fragile in faith, or struggling in life, or vulnerable for any reason. Christians may be distinctive most of all for this. For watching out for the little ones among us. You know who the "little ones" are that are given to you to care for. May God bless you, and strengthen you, and give you the perseverance never to forget them but to nurture love and faith in them.

I wouldn't want to imagine a world that was not being preserved by all these kinds of salty practices. You and I are part of something full of life and transforming power. It is the kingdom of God, seasoning the world. And what a delicious flavor it is.

Remember, Jesus didn't say, "Be more like salt." Jesus said, "You ARE the salt of the earth." You are already participating in this wondrous thing. You are already flavoring the whole. So never doubt that I am with you, Jesus says. Never doubt that you are my own, marked with my cross and graced with my Spirit.

"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace." Amen.