

February 5, 2023 – Isaiah 58:3-9 & Matthew 5:13-20

Salt is one of the most important nutrients in our diet. Which is ironic since, for people like me, it's also the cause of some very negative effects on our bodies. Something known as hypertension. High blood pressure. For us, salt is something to be avoided. But throughout the history of the world, salt was incredibly useful and valuable and sought after.

We add salt to food for basically two reasons: to make it taste better or as a preservative. Salt both enhances the function of most of our taste receptors while at the same time almost blocking the taste receptors for bitterness. The end result is an overall improvement in the flavor of our food. But on top of that, salt makes for a very inhospitable environment for many of the bacteria and fungi that make food spoil. So it's useful as a preservative as well.

Which is good, because human beings need some salt in our diet. Too much is harmful, yes, but too little is actually just as deadly. Sodium deficiency can cause all sorts of health problems. But don't worry. Most Americans eat way too much processed food to ever have a diet that is sodium deficient.

So overall, our diets may be bad, but salt is good. Salt is helpful. Salt is useful. And for me that really helps to illuminate this Gospel lesson for today. *“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.”*

You are the salt of the earth. Jesus' disciples are the salt of the earth. The church is the salt of the earth. And as salt, people should know when you are there. They should look around at a world that is falling apart with war and disease and hunger and poverty and say, “This is disgusting. I can't stand all this bitterness.” But then the church gets involved. And it becomes better. It becomes bearable. It becomes, dare I say, even good.

We are the people of God. We spread Godliness. Where we go, when we work, the world becomes more like what God wants it to be. We can't solve all the problems of this world. We can't turn a sinful world into a perfect world. We can't turn the desert into Eden. Only God can do that. And God will do that.

But we can be salt. We can make a disgusting world better than what it was. We can take away the bitterness. And when we do, we're valued for it. And our Father in heaven is glorified by our actions.

Yet so often, we are not salt. At least, not with any kind of saltiness. We're like the sodium in a can of soup. Have you ever looked at the nutritional information on a can of Campbell's soup. Huge, ridiculous quantities of sodium. That exists only to be a preservative. It doesn't actually add anything to the flavor. You wouldn't even know it was there if you didn't look at the label. It's supposedly salt, but it has no saltiness.

When the world looks at the church, how often does it have to look at the label to know we're here? Do the people of Boonville know that Immanuel is here because we're adding salt to our community? Or because we have a sign out by the road that they might notice when they drive past?

And the world is waking up to this fact. All around the country, people have concluded, “We don't need the church anymore. You are empty sodium. You are salt that doesn't make the world any less bitter. You're useless. Get out of our lives.”

And it hurts us to hear that. It should hurt. The Law always hurts. And we need to ask for forgiveness. We need to ask for forgiveness from the people whom we saw in need, but didn't help. We need to ask for forgiveness from the souls we could have reached, but never said a word. But most of all, we need to ask for forgiveness from our God and Savior.

Our Lord, who made it so easy for us. Who looked at us and said, “You heal their bodies and I'll heal their souls. You feed the hungry. I'll be the bread of life. You bandage wounds. I'll make the lame walk. You care for the sick. I'll raise the dead. You live for your neighbor. I'll die for both of you.”

He's made it so easy. He took all of the burden away. He's lived a righteousness that surpassed all of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law put together. And he's given it to us. He's done everything that we couldn't do in our human weakness. And he's done everything that we chose not to do in our human sinfulness.

He's given us freedom. But it's a freedom that doesn't abolish the law. It fulfills it. You know, we talk a lot about freedom in this country. It's an attribute that our society holds dear. But there are times when I think many people misunderstand the difference between freedom and anarchy.

Christ gives us freedom from the Law. But that's not the same as anarchy. That's not the same as eliminating the Law. The Law is still there. The Law is still good. God still wants us to be salt. To be seen and heard. He wants the church to be noticed. He wants people to see our good deeds and come to glorify Him.

Because, if we don't, we become people fasting for the sake of fasting. That's what Isaiah is talking about in our Old Testament Lesson. The Israelites were so proud of themselves for their personal piety. For fasting every time they were supposed to fast and observing every single festival of the Law.

And yet, despite all that rigid observance and detailed piety, God was still angry with them. "Why? Why God? We're such good Israelites. We do everything we're supposed to. We're at the Temple every Saturday. We fast before every feast day. We keep kosher and wear only wool and circumcise our sons and tithe our harvest. We do everything we're supposed to."

Everything except love their neighbor. Everything except treat people as they would want to be treated. And turn the other cheek when threatened. And act with justice for the oppressed. And give food to the hungry and shelter for the homeless and clothes to the naked. They were salt that had lost its saltiness. And so, yes, God was angry with them.

Yet, even as God was angry with the Israelites, he did not give up on them. He tells them that if they show an ounce concern for their neighbor, "*then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up speedily.*" Take a second to read that again.

If they love their neighbor, then their light shall break forth. That makes sense. Love for your neighbor is light in a dark world. I think we can all agree on that.

But also, if they love their neighbor, then their own healing shall spring up speedily. Not their neighbor's healing. The person showing this act of kindness will find themselves healed by doing it.

"*Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'*" You. Not the person you're helping. They've already cried to the Lord and they've already received their answer. Because the answer to their prayer was you. Your act of kindness is exactly what they were praying for. And now they know there is a God who heard them because you helped them.

No, then you shall call and the Lord will answer. Loving your neighbor actually brings you closer to God. Loving your neighbor actually brings his voice to your ears saying, "Here I am."

The people of Isaiah's day were fasting and praying to a God who they thought was absent. "*Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it,*" they asked. And so he gives them their answer. His answer to their prayers wasn't going to be found in the frequency of their fasting. It was going to be found in their love for their neighbor.

That's a lesson we could stand to learn. The future of the church in America – the future of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Boonville – isn't going to be found in the frequency of our fasting. It's going to be found in our love for our neighbor.

You are the salt of the earth. Christ himself has given you that identity. You were washed in the waters of baptism and came out of them a block of sodium chloride. And no failure on your part can take that away. You are salt. And salt is a good thing.

So are you going to do the work of salt? Are you going to make the world a less bitter place? Are you going to show your neighbor and yourself that God is still here by your love them? Because Christ has healed you and will continue to heal you through your love for others. Amen.