

March 1, 2023 – Colossians 4:2-6

A few weeks ago, I preached on our Gospel lesson for this evening. And, I'll be honest, my first reaction to seeing it used for our Lenten series was one of dismay. After all, how many different ways can a pastor preach about being salt? It's not that complex of an analogy. Maybe it would be worthwhile to hear about it twice in three years. But twice in three weeks? That's a little redundant.

But then I looked at our Epistle Lesson. I had, frankly, forgotten about this passage from Colossians when I preached on being salt the first time. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if St Paul wasn't referring back to Christ's words when he wrote these. But I realized it's an angle I didn't really examine a few weeks ago.

Because what I focused on then was being the salt of the earth in our actions. In how we care for our neighbor's body. How we help our neighbor in his physical needs. Making the world a less bitter place through our actions. But, in this passage, Paul goes in a slightly different direction: salting our speech. Salting our words. And that's something new to consider.

I was reminded of that in our Thursday morning, breakfast Bible study, just this past week. We were beginning a discussion of the Fifth Commandment. And the Fifth Commandment is very much talking about what I was just saying: caring for our neighbor's body. Helping his physical needs. But then a member of the class asked a question.

“Pastor, does the Fifth Commandment obligate us to preach the Gospel as well? Are we hurting our neighbor by withholding God's Word from an unbeliever?” It was a fantastic question. A completely different direction than I had intended to take the class. And I was forced to conclude that, yes, we are.

I mean, we're breaking a couple other commandments when we do that as well. We're breaking the First Commandment. You don't fear, love, and trust in God above all things and then refuse to talk about Him when you have the opportunity. And we're breaking the Second Commandment. There are very few uses of God's name that are more proper than using it to tell somebody about Christ. But, yes, there's a Fifth Commandment element as well.

It reminds me a little of Jonah. Jonah, who was called by God to go to Nineveh and preach to the Ninevites and call them to repentance. But who refused to go, not because he was scared to make the journey or scared to preach or scared of their persecution. No, Jonah refused to go to Nineveh because he didn't want the Ninevites to be saved.

He didn't want them to hear God's Law. He didn't want to give them the opportunity to repent. He didn't want God to relent and spare Nineveh. Which he was sure God would do if they repented. And which God did do, in the end.

No, Jonah wanted them to die. He wanted God to rain down fire and brimstone upon Nineveh. Because Nineveh was Jonah's enemy. It was the capital of Assyria, which had brutally invaded and ransacked Israel only a few years prior. And so Jonah wanted to see them physically and spiritually destroyed. And tried to do that by withholding God's Word from them. By withholding God's grace from them.

Now, I don't know that any of us are quite that intentional about withholding the Gospel. I can't think of a single time in my life that I've ever thought, “I hope God doesn't save that guy.” And I certainly hope none of you have either. Nevertheless, in the same way that the Fifth Commandment can be both about our action and our lack of action, it can also be about our speech and our lack of speech.

And that's where the salt that St Paul is talking about comes in. *“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* As sinful human creatures, our speech can be bitter in many different ways.

It's bitter when it is filled with complaining. Complaining about the government. Complaining about inflation. Complaining about the culture. Complaining about young people. Complaining about old people. Complaining about work, friendships, school, family, our spouses, technology, lack of technology, stores, banks, traffic. On and on and on. Complaining about anything and everything.

Now, I'm not saying that some of those complaints aren't justified. We live in a sinful world. And seeing sin around us is frustrating. It's natural to want to complain. But it makes for some very bitter speech.

And yet, when faced with sin, I think I'd rather hear complaining than the alternative: fear. That's another form of bitter speech for Christians. Fear of the world. Fear of evil. Fear of violence. Fear of want. Fear of disease. Fear of old age. Fear of pain. Fear of all the awful things in this world that we can't control.

Again, fear is a natural thing to talk about. Sin and its effects are scary, no doubt about it. I don't particularly like the world that my daughter is growing up in. I'm scared for her. I'm scared for the church in this country. I'm scared for all of you. And, yes, I'm scared for myself. But again, fear is a very bitter thing to talk about. It's needs some seasoning. It needs some salt.

And that's where there's a difference between what Jesus says and what Paul says. Jesus tells us, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" You. By the work of the Holy Spirit, you make the world less bitter. You make the world taste better. Every time you help someone, their life is a little more bearable than it was before.

Paul doesn't frame our speech in the same way. He doesn't say that our speech is salt. He says our speech needs to be seasoned with salt. Salt that comes from outside of us. What is that salt? Well, he tells us that too.

He says, "*Let your speech always be gracious.*" Or, as other translations put it, "*Let your speech always be with grace.*" "*Let your conversation be always full of grace.*"

Grace in our speech and conversation is salt. Grace makes our words less bitter. Grace makes our conversation taste better in the ears of those who hear it.

Well, what grace are we talking about here? Well, first and foremost, the grace of God. The grace of God makes the things we want to complain about less bitter. Because it sets our minds on things above. We don't need to be consumed with frustration about what the government is doing. The king above all kings is in control. We don't need to be agitated by stores or inflation or work. Our treasure is in heaven.

And the grace of God certainly sets our minds at ease when it comes to fear. For death has no sting when you know your sins are forgiven and your future is secure. The world and its terrors have no power over us when the grace of God says that they are passing away, but we will remain and abide with our Lord forever.

Season your speech with the grace of God and you can talk about the same stuff, but in a completely different way. Like a food you thought you hated, but you taste in a specific dish, seasoned in a specific way and suddenly, it doesn't taste that bad after all. This world is a nasty, rotten dish, until you add the grace of God to it. And then, all of a sudden... you know it's not so bad. I might just want to say something good about it.

We season our speech with the grace of God. But we also season our speech in a different way. We season our speech with grace for our neighbor. You see, Paul is talking about this whole subject in relation to how we talk to unbelievers. How we answer people outside the church. People who don't know or care about the grace of God.

But they do know us and they do pay attention to how we speak about others. And when our speech is filled with bitterness and complaints, with fear and unwholesome language about others, they notice. They need to hear the grace of God, but they need to hear it exemplified in our grace towards others.

When they hear our speech seasoned with the salt of forgiveness for the neighbor who has wronged us. When they hear our speech seasoned with the salt of compassion for the neighbor who is in need. When they hear our speech seasoned with the salt of mercy for the neighbor who doesn't deserve mercy.

Then they will begin to know what Paul calls "the mystery of Christ." The mystery of God's forgiveness and compassion and mercy toward sinners like us. Then God just might open a door for the Word to come through us into their lives.

You are the salt of the earth. But the grace of God is the salt of your speech. The salt of your conversations. The salt of how you interact with your neighbor outside the faith. It is salt that makes your speech less bitter. It is salt that makes you less bitter. And it is exactly what a bitter world needs to hear. Amen.