

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

We are called to be salt and light – but light always gets the spotlight (pun intended) and so today let's focus on salt!

One of the biggest treats I used to get as a child was my own jar of kosher mini dill pickles. I loved crunching my way through the pickles themselves, and then I relished drinking the juice (often borrowing one of my mom's sherry glasses to be fancy). I guess you could say I've always been more of a salt-tooth than a sweet-tooth.

This, along with my love of cooking, is why I loved last year's Netflix documentary *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, and the amazing cookbook it was based on, by chef Samin Nosrat. In both, Samin explores what salt is, as well as how to use it – and there's a lot more to salt than I thought.

Salt is one of several dozen essential nutrients without which we cannot survive. The human body can't store much salt, so we need to consume it regularly in order to be able to carry out basic biological processes, such as maintaining proper blood pressure and water distribution in the body, delivering nutrients to and from cells, nerve transmission, and muscle movement.¹

¹ *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat – Mastering the Elements of Good Cooking* by Samin Nosrat

In fact, we're hardwired to crave salt in order to ensure we get enough of it. Perhaps this is why it has been so important for so much of human history.

²The legendary Greek author Homer called salt a divine substance. The philosopher Plato described it as sacred. To the ancient Hebrews, it was the mark of an eternal covenant between God and humanity. The ancient Egyptians were known to salt their sacrifices and offerings, and the Aztecs even had a goddess of salt.

It may have been used in some ancient Christian baptismal rites, placing the sacramental salt of wisdom on the tongues of the newly baptized. Sumo wrestlers toss salt in the ring before a match to purify it, harkening back to an ancient religious ritual. In a few cultures, salt can protect against the evil eye or misfortune, and in others spilling salt is considered bad luck or a bad omen, like when Judas spills the salt at the table in da Vinci's famous painting of the Last Supper.

Across almost all cultures and religions, salt is holy, sacred stuff. But its importance isn't just spiritual.

As I shared earlier, it's physically important, too. Our bodies need salt, somewhere between two-thirds of a pound to more than 16 pounds each year to survive, depending on our level of activity. We can't produce it on our own, but without it, we die. Before refrigeration, salt enabled us to preserve food that would otherwise spoil. It had medicinal properties both as an antiseptic and as an antifungal. Today, salts are used in everything from industrial pharmaceuticals to treat diseases to simple saltwater gargles used to treat sore throats at home.

But salt isn't just spiritually and physically important, it's also been important to how civilizations have functioned.

² All historical notes about salt adapted from "Layers of Salt and Faith (A Homily)" by Rev. David Henson who references *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky.

In the ancient world, salt was a form of wealth. Ancient Roman soldiers were paid in salt, which is where the word salary originates and why a bad employee isn't worth their salt.

And as with anything of value, wars have been fought over it, from the Salt War between the city of Perugia and the Papal States in 1540 over a salt tax to the San Elizario Salt War of 1877 in Texas. Blockading goods, particularly salt, was also a way to cripple enemies. The scarcity of salt was so critical to the Revolutionary War efforts the Continental Congress formed a committee in 1777 to devise ways of producing salt for the United States. By taxing salt or monopolizing it, the ancient Roman and Chinese empires were built, their wars financed, other lands colonized, and indigenous people conquered.

But for as much bloodshed as it caused, because salt was common to all and an early staple of trade and commerce it also united disparate cultures. The most well-known of ancient road systems from the Romans had at least some roots in the transportation of salt. The Via Salaria, or Salt Road, still exists in Italy, now as a modern highway and has followed the same route for thousands of years.

Salt is in the lifeblood of all humans and woven through the fabric of all human history.

Which is why Jesus first tells his followers *you are the salt of the earth*, warning them not to lose their saltiness, before he mentioned light (remember light in those days = fire, another essential component to human existence). But in starting with salt, he was drawing on their deep and intimate knowledge of salt as fundamental to daily living – which is something we're pretty disconnected from.

Salt is something we don't really think about a lot – unless our doctor tells us to consume less of it. For us, salt is abundant, it's everywhere we look and always accessible – from shakers found on kitchen tables to packets at fast food restaurants to shelves of it at grocery stores. Salt is just always there for us in a way it wasn't in his day.

We need to hear Jesus' word with 1st century ears: when Jesus told those around him to be salt, he wasn't telling his followers to just be there, or to be abundant – two take-aways we can get with our modern ears.

No, he was comparing them, and us, to a substance that is holy and sacred, that is fundamental to life, and that is also profoundly communal.³

When Jesus talked about salt losing its taste, it was a bit of a misnomer. Because for all that salt **can do**, it's very difficult for it to lose its flavor. Even if you dilute it in water and can no longer taste it, it's still there – and once the water evaporates the salt will be left behind with its flavor intact.

In fact, the only way for salt to really lose its flavor is to eat it by itself. Have you ever tried to eat a handful of salt? Don't. While salt deepens and enhances other flavors, it becomes bitter and poisonous in isolation. This substance that **can** heal and bring life, in fact becomes deadly when consumed by itself – just four tablespoons of straight salt eaten at once can kill an adult.

Salt must be paired with other things, not used in isolation. Salt is ultimately communal.

And so too is Jesus' call to us, and to how we are to live the life of faith. One of the first things Jesus did in the gospels after being baptized was to call the disciples and form a community. Again and again throughout his ministry he pulled people from the margins and restored them to community through healing and through leading by example. And on his last night with his friends, he showed them and us how to continue to live together in community, with him present, through the sharing of the bread and wine with the promise that *wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I will be with them.*

³ This and following two paragraphs adapted from "Layers of Salt and Faith (A Homily)" by Rev. David Henson

For salt to lose its saltiness it has to exist in utter isolation, and the same is true for people of faith.

You cannot be a Christian in isolation. We are called into community first, and then are sent out as individuals to salt the world with God's love, compassion, justice, and reconciliation.

Our faith is not meant to merely be purely personal and comfortable, like a pair of slippers worn in in our own homes – Jesus proclaimed that faith must be active out in the world, where its flavor enhances everything it encounters.

This is why we come to church, why we join communities of faith when frankly it can feel like just one more thing that demands our limited time and energy when it feels like we don't have enough: we come to be gathered together with others and to be transformed through worship, learning, action, and community, so that we can be sent out as salt and light into the world – so that we are a part of creating a better world.

As the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The church is only the church when it exists for others.”

How do we exist for other at St. James'? In too many ways to count: through our Thrift Shop, Nursery School, and various other ministries. We are also periodically invited to serve and support those in need in more directed ways.

The Episcopal Diocese of Maryland has designated today as the “Sunday of Support for Puerto Rico.” This is a response to the ongoing and devastating earthquakes in our companion diocese, and our Bishop has asked us all to give as we are able to support the Episcopal Diocese of Puerto Rico to support their hospital, social services ministry, orphanage, and overall earthquake response. See page the last page of your bulletin for more information, and I hope you will join me in donating generously.

Lent is just around the corner, and our own Outreach Committee and Sunday School will be inviting us into supporting those in need locally and globally through the “reverse Lenten calendar” to collect items for Mt. Airy Net, and with mite boxes to support “A is for Africa.”

But it’s not just special programs that we are called into, or that even have the largest impact in the end. It is our everyday choices – to be kind or cruel, to show compassion or contempt, to sow generosity or scarcity – that have the power to bring life or death. When we choose to act for the common good we are salt of the earth, and when we act selfishly based on our own self-interest, it’s like four tablespoons for salt hoarded and consumed by itself – it leads to death.

And so my prayer for all of us is that we will choose to be the salt that Jesus calls us to be, in ways big and small – every day – for then we will be fully flavored salt, that is, true salt of the earth.

~ Amen ~