

September 26

Today's scriptures provide a lot of topics-- a regular smorgasbord of theological themes. Sometimes, confronting such an array, a preacher will try to cover them all. However it may be more fruitful to zero in on just one, and go deeper into that one, with the hope that the other verses will be illuminated indirectly as well. In any event there is not time to talk about everything, so today I am going to focus on just one verse, the very last verse in our last reading, in which we hear this curious saying of Jesus, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

I believe that after some deeper digging together, you will come to agree with me that although it is indeed curious, this is also quite a helpful saying. But there are some problems. For example, as someone pointed out at Wednesday Bible study, the saying seems to consider salt to be a good thing, whereas many people today are worried about salt. Too much salt in the diet is a bad thing! Salt can cause high blood pressure, leading to stroke and other ailments. As a result many people are on low salt diets. So when Jesus tells us to "have salt in yourselves," is he showing himself to be a purveyor of bad medical advice?

Well of course not. Jesus is not speaking literally about the results of blood tests, but metaphorically, using salt as a symbol of some a spiritual quality. Jesus frequently uses natural objects as symbols of spiritual realities. So with salt: Jesus uses this common commodity to speak about a deeper truth. We have to begin then asking what salt symbolizes elsewhere in the Bible.

Here is a nice summary I found online:

*Salt in the ancient world was a precious commodity (even monopolized by the royalty in Egypt and Persia). Roman soldiers were partially paid with packets of salt ("sal" in Latin); this was the origin of our word "salary" and of phrases like "worth his salt," etc. Being costly, salt was an appropriate offering to God, as a "covenant of salt" (Lev. 2: 13; II Chron. 13:5; Num. 18:19) used in sacrifices by the Israelites (Ezek. 43:24) and for the accompanying sacrificial meal (Gen. 31:54).*

The website also notes that: salt was

*Used for 3500 years to preserve meats from deterioration, so it became a symbol of preservation and spiritual incorruptibility that was to characterize anyone offering sacrificial worship. Shared at the sacrificial meal, salt became a symbol of friendship and hospitality, a custom-symbol still used today in Arab culture.*

So: to summarize: salt is valuable in its own right; salt can symbolize an offering to God; salt preserves from decay; salt symbolizes friendship; salt improves the flavor of food.

Gracious! One substance with so many symbolic meanings! Which of these did Jesus have in mind when he said, have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another? My guess is, all of them! By saying “have salt in yourself” Jesus meant all of it: be a person who adds flavor to life, as salt adds flavor to food, who is friendly, for salt symbolizes friendship, and be durable, and worthy to be devoted to God, and intrinsically valuable—like salt is. Or, to put it in the negative, Jesus meant: do not be dull, or unfriendly, or flimsy, or indifferent to God, and certainly not useless—as salt is none of those things.

To describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus then, and have some salt in one’s self, I am going to introduce a term which to my mind captures all these meanings: PIZZAZZ. A follower of Jesus should have a little spiritual pizzazz. Maybe you can think of a better technical term but I’ll stick with pizzazz for now. Having salt in one’s self means to be more faithful, and interesting, and dedicated. And come to think of it, people I know who are faithful Christians generally do have pizzazz. They are interesting, helpful, and dedicated. They are (to quote Jesus in another context) the salt of the earth. There are certainly folk here at St James who match this profile, wouldn’t you say?

Christians are people who add pizzazz to life. That’s what it boils down to.

But then there is the second part of the saying, when, after saying, “have salt in yourselves,” Jesus adds, “and be at peace with one another.” We may wonder, is this some kind of warning? That is, that if you put a bunch of salty people together in one place, they might end not being peaceful? Maybe too much flavor in a group can cause quarrels?

But I suspect that Jesus actually meant the opposite, namely, that there is something about a group of people having salt in themselves that causes them to be at peace with one another. Far from causing trouble in a group, being salty, having pizzazz, tends to create a harmony, a richness, like when many spices go into a soup that makes it unique and flavorful, in unexpected ways. Salty individuals make for a tasty group, because their unique flavors work together to make something delightful.

And come to think of it, Christian congregations do each have distinctive flavors, once you get to know them. No two congregations are exactly alike, and this is because of the contribution of the different taste of the different members in the congregation. Every parish has its own pizzazz, due to the unique mix of people it contains.

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

My hope was that by focusing on just this one verse we could simplify things. But in fact I feel like this one verse has just opened out one horizon after another. We are no closer to having just one simple meaning than when we started. But we shouldn’t be surprised however: studying scripture and getting to know God are infinite processes, and even the smallest piece of the puzzle reveals so much more.

Anyway, let me try to draw the conclusion. I think Jesus is saying that his followers, both as individuals and as congregations, should be, and are, flavorful blessings to one another and to the world.

How can we ramp up our ability to be a blessing to one another and the world? Well, here at St James, exactly six weeks from today, we will have one opportunity to do this. November 7 will be the annual visit of our Bishop, Marty Stebbins. I know she has been here frequently, but November 7 is her actual official Visitation (with a capital V) which she is required to make annually to each parish in Montana. Part of her Visitation (with a capital V) will be leading the service called, Reaffirmation of Baptismal vows. In our baptisms we get sprinkled not just with water, but also with the spiritual salt we have been talking about, which ultimately is the Holy Spirit. For Christians, our ability to be a blessing to one another and to the world always goes back to our baptisms-- the promises we make there, and the power of the Holy Spirit we receive there. Therefore: to reaffirm baptismal vows together, and to receive the blessing of the Bishop on us as we try to live them, is a great way to get more spiritual salt into us, enhancing the flavorful blessing we bring to the world. You can Reaffirm more than once, by the way. It's not like baptism, which is a once-only event, and unique. Reaffirmation is meant to be done whenever it is helpful—perhaps every time the Bishop visits.

For this reason, I am encouraging everyone to make a personal reaffirmation on that day, November 7, and to receive the Bishop's personal blessing in prayer. Think of it as a mini-confirmation service. Like a confirmation service, it requires a little advance preparation. So in addition to presenting yourself to bishop Marty on November 7, I'm asking everyone to join me for a little advance preparation on Sunday, October 17, at 4PM. It should only take an hour or so, which is way shorter than Confirmation classes. I promise it will be interesting, full of salt. If you can't come October 17 at 4PM, let me know, and we'll find another time to discuss it.

I've been talking this up for several months now. At last week's vestry meeting I asked the vestry to lead the way, and for all the members of the vestry to Reaffirm on November 7. I hope everyone else will follow the vestry's lead. I warned Bishop Marty that there might be a bunch of people lining up for her blessing, come November 7. She says that's fine. She's ready. I really think her Visitation can be an opportunity to renew our common purpose, giving energy and hope for the future. Please be part of it then, first by joining me on October 17, three weeks from today. Then, six weeks from today, I predict, November 7 will be an occasion when the Holy Spirit, tasting the rich broth that is St James parish, says, "Hmm...that's good! But I'm going to add just a little more salt anyway: that will make it even better."