

## Salt and Other Necessities

### Matthew 5:13-16

In the Financial Times last week there was an article about the 'European Christian Equity Index', a new investment opportunity that is trying to earn competitive returns without trading in shares that involve alcohol or firearms or gambling, among other things.

It's probably easy to poke fun or to be cynical about this. But I see it as an attempt to join what some people believe with how they invest. Whatever you might think about it, if the last few years have taught us anything it's that we should pay more attention to how and where we earn our money.

*13"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled.*

*14"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before all people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

We're going to spend two Sundays in this brief passage. This week we focus on the salt in the passage, and next week we're going to talk about the light.

We've been talking over these past few weeks about the idea of the 'active ingredient.' The active ingredient is the substance in medicine that makes the drug work—that makes us feel better. Whatever else makes up the rest of the pill or liquid, it's the active ingredient that makes it work—the part of a drug that actually heals us, that makes us feel better, the part of the medicine that's designed to restore our health.

The technical term for the active ingredient in a medicine is *pharmakos*, which originally described a drug or even a magical substance. That same word also described the 'scapegoat' in ancient Greece, part of the practice of placing

whatever harms the health of a community or an animal, and then sending it out into the desert. The hope was that the scapegoat would restore the health of the community—of the people and of the land.

We continue our series on what it means to be the active ingredients that bring the message of the gospel to the places where we live and work and study and shop.

Along the way we're going to see how living what we believe can be a way to help restore health to our communities—to help take away whatever threatens the life and shalom of the world around us—to bring reconciliation and justice and even peace to the places we go and live in every day.

This is a journey through what it means to be missional people in a missional church. Those are the terms we're going to use over these next weeks and months.

We find our missional habits and practices at the intersection of our minds and hearts—where what we know and believe about God, about the gospel of Jesus Christ—where all of that comes together in how we live as God's people in the world.

The Christian faith is a missional faith. The church, meaning everyone who follows Christ in faith—the church of Jesus Christ has a mission, and the mission of the church is to wrestle with what it believes and teaches about what God is doing in the world, and to be instruments of God's love and plan everywhere we go, and in everything that we do.

That two-part definition is the sole mission of the church. Knowing God and living what we know is what we're called to do and to be as missional people in a missional church. That's the point for all of us as we move through the spring season.

What does that mean?

In one sense, being mission-minded and mission-hearted means understanding the gospel and what it offers for us and for the world.

It also means that we allow that gospel to season everything that we do, everywhere that we are.

The guiding text for this series is as familiar as it is crucial. It gets at the heart of what the life of Jesus teaches us about being the Body of Christ.

'...the Word became flesh and lived among us.'

Knowing about God is important. Living what we know is the rest of the story.

It's in living what we believe about Jesus Christ that makes us active ingredients in our homes and lives and schools and jobs and neighborhoods.

So back to our text. It's hard to imagine our lives without salt, and yet it's a strange sort of relationship. Mark Kurlansky wrote a book a few years back about salt and its role in history. (I'll pause for you to snicker at the idea of reading a history book about salt.)

He helps us understand the origins of the salt we take for granted on most of our tables. He writes:

"When sodium, an unstable metal that can suddenly burst into flame, reacts with a deadly poisonous gas known as chlorine, it becomes the staple food sodium chloride, NaCl, from the only family of rocks eaten by humans."

He also mentions a booklet produced in 1920 by the Diamond Crystal Salt Company of St. Clair, Mich., that listed a mere 101 uses, from "keeping the colors bright on boiled vegetables" to "making ice cream freeze," from "removing rust" to "sealing cracks," from "cleaning bamboo furniture" to "killing poison ivy." And that's not to mention all the medicinal applications, like treating "dyspepsia, sprains, sore throats and earaches." Today, Kurlansky writes, the salt industry boasts more than 14,000 uses.

An ancient Egyptian document makes the claim that 'there is no better food than salted vegetables'.

The Romans thought salt was an aphrodisiac, and used the term 'salax' to describe a man in love. We get the term salacious from the same place. I'm still trying to figure out how that part works its way into the sermon.

And salt has had a whole range of other important properties and roles in the history of civilization.

Preservative: The use of salt as a preservative for food transformed civilization and made it possible for more people to eat healthier food than they could before. Until the advent of the freezer, salt was the primary tool for preserving food and making it possible to distribute it around the world.

Medicine: Salt was used to clean out infections and heal any number of illnesses. Salt itself has been the active ingredient in a range of medicines right up to modern times.

Defining value: At one point salt was the major economic unit of the civilized world. It was used to pay employees and soldiers, and for a while functioned as the exchange rate mechanism between nations. It's where we get the word 'salary'.

Seasoning: This last use of salt is the one most familiar to us. It tastes good. We put it on food and whatever we're eating comes to life. We get the word 'salad' from an old word for 'salted vegetables'. Can you imagine eggs or French fries or even a steak without salt? Candy makers know that even sweet things taste better with a little salt.

How does this help us to be missional people? To be a missional church?

How does an understanding of the role of salt help us to become the active ingredients in our own places and lives?

Think about the properties of salt that we just talked about. There are four principles here about salt that can help us become the people and the place God calls us to be.

Preservative: We're supposed to be deeply involved in the world around us,

keeping it fresh and preventing it from getting rotten. God made this world to be nourishing—not just in food but in culture and commerce—family and political life, too.

Medicinal: As followers of Christ we're called to be agents of healing and comfort, figuring out ways to offer cures or solutions to whatever makes our communities and cultures sick. The gospel has important things to say about personal and social morality. Just because we've done it poorly in the past, doesn't mean we can surrender the field. Being active ingredients in our communities is how we share Christ's work with the world he came to redeem.

Defining value: We don't get paid in salt anymore, even if we're worth our salt. But as Christians we're called to claim our voice in defending the value of everyone and everything God has made. That's why we work for economic and social justice in the world—it's why we give and serve in efforts to stop the abuse of God's people wherever it happens.

Seasoning: I love this one, because it reminds us that this business of being disciples of Jesus is supposed to be enjoyable—it's supposed to make life better, more flavorful. It's not right that meeting the savior of the universe in a transforming way somehow dooms us to being the stick in the mud at a party. Life is a gift, and enjoying life honors the gift God gave us all. When we become people who enjoy our lives not in spite of our faith, but because of it, we become salt to the world around us—people whose very lives make other people's lives better.

If you don't believe me on that, read the 8th chapter of Nehemiah. God's people are back in their homeland and they gather to hear the Scripture read out loud. They start to weep and worry, but God tells them through a prophet to stop their crying, to get their best food and drink and to throw a party. He tells them to find people who don't have enough and share it with them so they can celebrate too.

It should be a source of joy to know us. It should be a source of happiness and anticipation for our neighbors to see us and spend time with us. Does it work that way for you and your neighbors?

The invitation to all of us as we seek to live as salt in our communities is to reflect

the joy of being forgiven, transformed people. As we move through this series of messages, that's going to be our focus.

'...the Word became flesh and lived among us.' The call is on us to do the same.

That European Christian Stock Index I mentioned before is just one example of how to do this in the world. It's not the whole answer, and it may or may not work in the long run. But it's an attempt to enter into the broader world—into the culture around us—and to live and thrive as an example of Christian values.

Jim Belcher, who will be preaching here in two weeks, makes a case for living in a way that is connected to our communities—being agents of the gospel in the culture. He writes:

"We should be known as those who create culture for the common good, for all people and not just fellow believers, culture that makes life better, more whole, for the entire city. While we are distinct from the surrounding culture, we also engage it. Add to this the mandate to seek the welfare of the city, and we get a powerful recipe for cultural transformation."

**I've said this before, but the people in this room on any given Sunday have enough influence and control enough resources to change the world. Will you?**

It's in joining what we believe to what we do—allowing our faith to call us to action—it's in seeing how what we believe informs how we live—it's in all of that that we become salt—the active ingredients in our homes and jobs and communities that communicate and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in meaningful ways.

Next week, as we honor our teachers and youth volunteers, we're going to shift our focus to the 'light' part of this passage—the part about how we take in and reflect the word of God in our lives. We can bridge the gap between the two with our song of response. Let's stand and sing together, 'Thy Word is a Lamp Unto My Feet'.