



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Salt and Light

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

February 6, 2011

Salt. It seems so ordinary and easy to come by in the handy container on your grocery shelf. We use it liberally in our cooking and even on our sidewalks. And unless your doctor warns you to lower your intake, we don't often think much about it. It's just so common. But the people who sat on the hillside listening to Jesus would have been shocked at such an idea. For them salt was a most valuable commodity, so in considering what Jesus might have meant by "salt of the earth", perhaps it would help to know a bit about this versatile mineral.

Salt is one of the things that the human body cannot do without. We need a certain level to successfully digest our food, and salt helps our cells stay hydrated. This essential quality of salt has been recognized for a very long time. There is a Chinese document on pharmacology from 5000 years ago that discusses 40 kinds of salt and methods of extraction and processing that are still used today.

That salt was long considered precious is exemplified by its use as currency. Roman soldiers were paid in salt, and slaves were bought with it. To be worth one's salt meant just that. The soldier's special ration was known as the *salarium agrentum*, from which we get our word salary.

Salt played an important role in the American colonies. The first patent from the crown was to Samuel Winslow of the Mass. Bay Colony for a method of salt production. In 1777, Lord Howe was jubilant when he captured General Washington's salt supply. The French kings developed a salt monopoly, and the prices they charged for it contributed to the unrest that eventually became the Revolution. Later, thousands of Napoleon's troops died in retreat from Russia, because their wounds could not heal, due to the lack of salt in their diet. In 1864, Union forces captured Saltville, Virginia and its salt processing facilities. The scarcity of salt became a health and morale problem for the South. The Erie Canal was known as the "ditch that salt built", because salt was the primary cargo on that waterway. Gandhi defied the British "salt laws" when he mobilized his people to walk all the way to the ocean to harvest free salt.

The history of religion is full of references to salt. Jewish Temple offerings included salt along with animals. Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she turned back to look upon the destruction of Sodom. In Buddhism, salt repels evil spirits, hence salt thrown over one's shoulder is thought to be a ghost-buster technique. In Shinto, salt is used to purify areas, including the Sumo wrestling ring. A handful of salt is thrown out before the match begins.



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And in Christianity, until Vatican II, a bit of salt was put on the lips of a baby at baptism – no doubt a reminder of today's Gospel. You are the salt of the earth. Jesus was not telling the crowds that they were commonplace or simple. Being the salt of the earth tells people that they are precious, they are divine currency, they are necessary for health and [like the lake of the wounded], they can also heal the wounds of the earth and her creatures. The word used here for earth, γῆ, from which we get Gaia, would imply all of these things – it can mean the land, the inhabited earth, and what lives in it. Jesus was telling the assembled throng about their intrinsic worth and that they were more than they or their oppressors knew. That was not the message that Galileans were normally given, so to hear this extraordinary rabbi telling them that they were the salt of the earth might have been hard for them to believe.

But then he went one better; he said “you are the light of the world!” The word “world” is different than that used for “earth” in the previous verse. It is κόσμος and it is a much bigger concept. κόσμος means many things—the whole created order, and even the affairs of the world, including that which is hostile to God and Christ. It is the word used in the verse from John “He was in the world and the world did not know him.” So to these mostly uneducated farmers, laborers, and downtrodden people, Jesus said – you are a light of all Creation. Light is the stuff of God. That was a lot to take in. Jesus didn't say, “now, go home and feel good about yourself!” He said “now that you know who you are, let the world see it – “Let your light so shine that people will see it and know that is from God ...”

Jesus asks for radical change from us – in how we think about ourselves and how we act in the world. It sounds really hard, but once you try it, it is not as hard as you think. Listen to this modern day story about being the Light of the world.

Kevin Salwen writes: “We know our family's decision looks a bit nutty. After all, how many families listen when their teenage girl insists they sell their house and give away half the money to charity? I'll admit, our project sounds goofy, impetuous, perhaps even irresponsible. But that's what we did.”

“One day in Fall 2006, as we were stopped at a familiar intersection a mile from our Atlanta home, our then 14-year-old daughter noticed a beautiful black Mercedes on her right, juxtaposed with a shabbily-dressed man asking for food on her left. Recognition turned to anger turned to action: At Hannah's urging to help shrink the disparities between the haves and have-nots in our society, we sold our dream house, moved into one half the size and began to give away half the proceeds to help people halfway across the planet. My favorite question since we started this family journey is one we get often: “I understand why a 14-year-old girl would become outraged about the world's issues and why she would ask you to sell your house ... but, why would you as parents agree to do it?”



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Kevin and his wife thought about what was important, and it came down to living with the concept of abundance and oodles of love. He said, “In our family, we hurtled along accumulating things...but Hannah stopped our family's momentum that day. Since that moment, the more we've examined this abundant life, the more we realize that everyone has more than enough of something. Spend 6 hours a week on Facebook? Cut it in half and now you have a new 3-hour resource to sing in a nursing home or clean a neighborhood park. Eat out four times a week? Cut that in half and share what you save with the local soup kitchen. A life of abundance, not scarcity.”

When they sold their big house, they rediscovered themselves – they no longer lived near one another but with each other. And working with the Hunger Project and half the proceeds of the sale of their house, they have changed the lives of 30,000 people in Ghana who now have hope for their children and grand-children.

Talk about letting your light shine...but as with all things in God's economy, the Salwens have gained more than they have given away. As they became salt for a wounded society, they were healed. As they shone their light into the world, they discovered the life of abundance. Thanks be to God.