

In one of the cabinets in our kitchen here at the church
we keep a big basket of salt and pepper shakers,
which we haul out every time we have a fellowship meal.
I wondered, this week, if any of the salt in the basket's shakers
had lost its saltiness.

After all, in the gospel today, Jesus says,
"You are the salt of the earth."
"If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out."

Jesus' mention of salt led me to our church kitchen,
where I tasted some of our congregation's salt.
And it was
still
salty.

But our LCOS salt might have been rather new, I thought,
what with the Fellowship Team taking care of the shakers.
So I started wondering about other congregations
and *their* salt.
I talked to my friend Jackie, who's pastor of a church on Forest Hill Avenue.
She looked in her church's kitchen.
(They keep their salt shakers in a drawer.)
They hadn't been touched in a while,
but Pastor Jackie tasted her congregation's salt,
and it was
still
salty.

This led me to put a call out to other pastors on social media:
Who could find the oldest or least-saltiest salt
in a Christian community?
One pastor wrote about recently finding,
in a cabinet in her church's kitchen,
forgotten paper bags marked "Sunday School."
Inside was salt so old it had solidified into bricks.
This salt was from the last time the Sunday School

attempted to hand-churn ice cream,
 which she said was six or seven years ago.
 Other pastors posted photos of salt containers
 with labels *clearly* from previous eras,
 looking like they belonged on a TV set for a 1950s sit-com.

But they all reported,
 the salt
 tasted
 salty.

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It's a good guess that
 in most every single American mainline Protestant church
 there is some salt shaker somewhere that has been utterly neglected.
 Forgotten, stuffed into a drawer.
 Gone half-used, unused in a cabinet.
 Possibly turned into brick under a sink.

But the *flavor* of all this neglected salt,
 it stays the same. It still tastes salty.
 What *changes* is the salt's
 texture.

That happens with our faith, too.
 The texture of our faith life can change.
 We move and join a new church, and faith changes shape.
 We grieve, and then heal; our faith dehydrates and rehydrates.
 Our children rebel, a debt comes due,
 someone falls ill and we have to step up,
 and our faith clumps or ossifies or disintegrates into a fine powder.

Faith losing its predictable texture happens on a broader scale too
 in the church beyond our individual lives.
 We see the trends of people—young and old—leaving the church,
 dehydrating local congregations.
 We look around at our world full of revenge and violence and racism and
 poverty,

and our apathy in the face of such sin
 slowly dries our thirst for righteousness into a solid brick.
 Disease spreads, governments bicker, temperatures in Antarctica rise,
 and clumps in our faith forms
 as we begin to wonder if God is really paying attention to our world anyways.

As happens with table salt,
 when we expect our faith to maintain one *particular* texture,
 these changes are unwelcome.
 They make us believe that our faith has gone bad, or is problematic,
 maybe even useless.
 So, as with salt, we might just throw it out,
 saying faith is no longer good for anything.
 Or we put many little grains of rice in it
 to maintain the texture we expect our faith to have,
 continuing to gather and worship
 simply to keep the *texture* of our faith consistent and comfortable.

But the Good News
 of all those neglected, solidified salt stores in church kitchens
 is that the salt,
 no matter its texture or environment or age or appearance,
 still
 tastes
 salty.

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The people who were listening to Jesus
 when he first said, “You are the salt of the earth”—
 they knew the feeling of when salt changes texture
 AND of when faith changes texture.

The gospel writer Matthew
 tells us about the crowd who was listening to Jesus preach these words,
 and he writes that it’s full of the sick, people with various diseases and pains,
 demoniacs, epileptics,
 and paralytics.

These are people whom broader society would tell
that they were useless.

Like salt that had turned to bricks or clumped up and lost its typical texture,
these demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics, sinners,
would have been seen as people who were no longer good for anything.
So they could simply be disregarded,
thrown out to the margins of the population,
trampled under the feet of the better off.

But Jesus, before we get to his words about salt,
calls them BLESSED.

And these sick people with various diseases and pains,
they *never* expected to hear that they were blessed.
No one else expected to hear them called blessed either.
To put a salt-spin on it, BLESSED was a new *texture* for them.
BLESSED was an unexpected texture,
a different texture to these people's relationship with God
that neither they nor others had simply considered.

Jesus goes on to name all kinds of qualities—all kinds of textures—
that the world does NOT admire—
being poor, mourning, meek, merciful, making peace—
and says these textures too
are BLESSED.

These would have been—and still are—unexpected *textures* of faith,
but they are not an unexpected *flavor* of faith.
By calling these people-on-the-margins blessed,
Jesus points to a God who works through the lepers and lame,
—the same God who's always worked through the least expected means and
the lowliest people.
By calling them blessed,
Christ reminds these people-on-the-margins
that they are full of flavor society doesn't think they have,
if only they—and others!—would recognize
their God-given dignity and grace.
If only they would taste and see
that their salt
is still salty.

And for the people who were first to read Matthew's gospel—
 those first-century Christians forming the early church—
 their relationship with God was also like salt,
 salt that has clumped up:
 for their faith had lost its natural shape and texture.
 Matthew's first-century readers lived in turbulent times
 for the church, for society, and for politics.
 They lived under the social and economic uncertainty of their Temple's
 destruction . . .

Under political parties fighting with one another and outside empires
 were vying for a share—or all of—the power . . .

Under rulers who heard the teachings of Jesus and said,
 "I'm not sure I agree with that."

They would have seen themselves in the salt
 that solidified under the sink
 or lumped up in the shaker:
 feeling like they'd lost their connection with God,
 the texture of their faith having changed into something unrecognizable,
 rendering it useless in the face of such opposition.

To those first church members,
 Jesus' proclamation that they ARE the salt of the earth
 and the light of the world
 is an invitation to renew their faith
 and re-engage their connection with God
 for the sake of the earth and the world.
 Yes, like neglected salt,
 faith in the lives of those first century Christians
 had changed in the way it looked and felt,
 in the way it appeared in its cultural context and operated societally,
 but the essence of faith had not changed.
 God still loved and was with them.
 The Kingdom of Heaven still belonged to those persecuted for righteousness'
 sake.
 And if they bothered to taste and see
 they would discover their relationship with God still had all the flavor
 it ever had.

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All that salt in the church kitchen,
hoarded in drawers
stowed away in cabinets
or forgotten under sinks,
it's still salty.

The texture of salt may change,
but the flavor of salt does not.

The context, feelings, consistency, and appearance of our faith
will change,
but faith does not.
That's because faith is a gift;
it comes from God, not on us,
and God makes sure the flavor of faith is never lost.

God's love for us never dries up.
Christ's blessing for all the world, especially the least,
may get shoved aside,
but it never loses its taste.
The Spirit's invitation to revive our faith
and use our salt for the earth or share our light for the world
may get neglected or forgotten,
but the Spirit never stops seasoning our lives.

Our faith—individual and collective—
may have been sitting in the cabinet for a while.
But today Jesus invites us to take it out.
Break off a hunk.
Shake out the clumps.
Taste and see.

It's still salty.
So get seasoning.

AMEN.