

What do pickles, beef jerky, Egyptian lemons, bath bombs, and icy highways have in common? The answer is salt. Yes, salt. Salt has been vital to the expansion of the human race. Our ancestors learned how to cull salt from salt licks, salt marches, tide pools and the oceans to preserve meats and vegetables. We use salt to enhance the flavor of food and to stabilize and hydrate our bodies. And like anything that we like too much, too much salt can be bad for us.

Salt has been an important part of commerce and religious life since the time of the Egyptians. There are hieroglyphics of salt given as a gift to the Pharaoh. The Romans paid their soldiers in bags of salt. The word salary actually derives from the word for salt.<sup>1</sup> Salt has been used to chase away demons. Our Roman brothers and sisters placed salt on the lips of an eight day old infant to keep demons away from the new born.<sup>2</sup> And there are some folks who continue to throw a few grains of salt over their shoulder to chase away demonic forces.

Salt has been so precious that tribes and nations have gone to war to maintain control over salt production. Since 300 BCE governments have used salt as a source of revenue to fill their coffers. In the 1930's Gandhi lead the Salt March in resistance to the high taxes imposed by the United Kingdom on salt production in India.

Among the Israelites salt was a sign of purity and incorruptibility so it was used to seal contracts and friendships.<sup>3</sup> The covenant between God and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai was called a covenant of salt; that is an unbreakable agreement.<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Leviticus we are told that with all offerings there is also to be an offering of salt to God.<sup>5</sup> When Jesus called the disciples the salt of the earth he was referring to their integrity and wisdom in living their faith.<sup>6</sup>

And then we come to Mark's Gospel where Jesus warns the disciples against losing their saltiness.<sup>7</sup> That statement has always puzzled me. What does salt have to do with faith? And just how does one lose their saltiness?

Thinking about salt, I am sure we would not use salt littered with dirt and debris to preserve food. I am also sure we would not want to put salt in water to soak

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<sup>1</sup> Saltworks, "History of Salt?" accessed online 25 September 2018 @ <https://www.seasalt.com/history-of-salt>

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1230.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1230.

<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1990), 1230.

<sup>5</sup> *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2003), 217 notes to Numbers 18:19.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 2:13

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:13.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:50

tired feet if we thought it was going to turn out to be a mud bath rather than a soothing footbath. When we think of salt in terms of being necessary for us to live, to maintain our physical and mental health, we may begin to get an idea of what Jesus' is talking about. Are the actions of the disciples, are our actions, signs of a life giving faith or something else?

One way to make sense of this concept is to look at some of the activities of the disciples as presented in Mark's Gospel. The disciples are very human. They have tempers and passions. They hear what they want to hear. They often need to hear things over and over again before anything makes sense. And even with all of their foibles they vie for greatness and recognition.

When the disciples were on the road with Jesus, they were given the charge to heal the sick and cast our demons. They failed miserably in these activities.<sup>8</sup> So they felt inadequate which was exasperated by Jesus telling them they did not pray enough. In their feeling of inadequacy they got into a one-up-manship about who was the greatest among them. The need to be in control, to have power over others, to be looked up to by others they believed was necessary, as like all of us, they wanted to feel good about themselves. And then you add insult to injury as John reports how an unknown person is successful in healing in Jesus' name. Out of jealousy the man was told to cease and desist, as he was not a card-carrying member of Jesus' group.

Feelings of inadequacy and jealousy, the desire for power, and being questioned as to the sincerity of one's spiritual disciplines can result in a lack of saltiness. Such actions and feelings detract from life rather than enhance life as we tend to lash out or seek to regain control. We end up shifting our focus inward rather than outward. So a lack of saltiness can result in a lack of faith, a decline in one's attention to God, and a failure to live one's faith everyday.

So Jesus' uses metaphors to help us understand how important it is to rid ourselves of those stumbling blocks, those things we need to cut out of our lives so that we are able to maintain our saltiness and move forward in love in Jesus' name.

And I must say these are not to be taken literally. Cutting off a foot or a hand or gouging out an eye, are extremes most of us would not want to think about. The severity of the actions would have spoken loudly to those who have worked the fields, tended to livestock or needed strong arms to pull in nets of fish. Such a

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 9:14-29

mandate would have spoken clearly to those living in a community where to be without an eye, or a hand, or a foot would have meant limited access to community life.

Thinking metaphorically Jesus tells the disciples to throw those things that pull us away from living our faith faithfully into the fires of Gehenna. Our scripture translates Gehenna as hell. Gehenna is known as a garbage dump outside of the walls of Jerusalem. Gehenna was once the place where wayward kings of Israel would sacrifice their children by fire. Gehenna is a cursed place. Jesus is telling us that those things that cause us to sin, those things in life that cause us to turn from God are only good for a cursed trash dump as they do not give life.

So rather than cut off a hand or a foot or an eye what do we need to prune or cut away in our lives so that we can move into a greater relationship with God? What does life throw at us resulting in our pulling away from God rather than turning to God? As I was pondering these questions I became overwhelmed with the possibilities and our need to dig deep within as we contemplate the disposition of our hearts. It may come as a surprise but we need to put as much attention to the little things as we do to those big things that pull us from God.

In a class I am taking, we have been talking about the necessity of pruning; letting go of those distractions in life that inhibit our ability to hear God. One person shared how they needed to walk away from their desire to please everyone especially those who spoke loudly so that she would be better able to hear God's voice. Recently I have experienced the need to let go of anger, acknowledging those things that are no longer life enhancing as well as letting go of my determination to change those things I have no control over.

Each of us has different triggers that pull us away from our faith walk. For you it may be feelings of persecution, abandonment, and dread over worldly concerns. Or, it might be those things we do just to live life fully but have become all-consuming. Struggling to pay the bills, working to gain more wealth, comforts or stuff can get in the way of our faith and cause us to lose saltiness. Or we may be consumed by health issues, or insisting on self-sufficiency when we are really in need of help. Or we may be unwilling to see, let alone work against, the injustices in this world, those norms and actions that prevent us from living in peace with one another.

But pruning, letting go is not limited to just those things that are negative in life. We also need to think about those things that appear to be abundantly good. The first time I saw a person clip, what looked to me like perfectly healthy

rosebuds before they had opened, I was horrified. But the gardener assured me that to do so would result in the remaining roses becoming larger and healthier.

A colleague shared the story of an agricultural consultant who had a passion for apples. This person was often asked to help homeowners or assist growers in increasing the quality of their apple crop. More often than not he would look at the tree and proceed to remove half the fruit. This usually led to some consternation on the part of the owner. All they saw was their crop being thrown into the trash heap. But the apple man would assure them that their tree was only able to produce so much good quality fruit. Too many apples on a tree would result in lots of apples but apples of inferior quality.

And so it is with us. When there is too much in life, we need to set something down so that we may grow. Pruning, letting go, being sparked or sprinkled or salted with fire is a refining, just like the refining that happens with gold or silver. When we let go, when we make room for us to keep growing into all God has called us to be.

As we are refined we grow in our ability to work together, even across denominational lines. John Wesley put it this way, “although a difference in opinion or modes of worship may prevent an external union (that is across denomination lines), it need not prevent our union in affection.”<sup>9</sup> We have a common goal to work for the good of all people.

As we are refined we find it easier to share with one another, support one another, and walk with one another in new ways so that together, regardless of our political or social or economic position, we are able to share the message of God’s love and mercy for all. As we are refined we find it easier to extend the hand of friendship and hospitality to all people. As we are refined, as we cut out the excess and the dead weight within us, we find we are better able to live in peace within our selves resulting in our ability to live in peace with one another.

And so we remain salty, that is effective in growing our faith; our love of God and our love for each other. For in our saltiness we live our faith as we share our faith with every breath we take. Amen

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<sup>9</sup> John Wesley’s Sermons, “Catholic Spirit,” ed: Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1991), 301.