

## Salt: Beyond Ice-Melt

Matthew 5:13-20  
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When Jesus told his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth,” his voice had the ring of a commandment, ‘BE the salt of the earth.’

I’m thinking the disciples would not have had any trouble interpreting that metaphor. Salt was basic to the local economy, basic to every household, basic to every kitchen.

The thing about salt is its distinctive taste. When you lick a block of salt, you know it’s salt. You can’t mistake it for sugar or for anything else under the sun. If salt wanted to masquerade for something else in the spice drawer, it would utterly fail.

So, when Jesus looked the disciples in the eye and said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was imploring them to be as distinctive in their discipleship as salt is in its flavor. ‘Be unmistakably one of my disciples.’

My grandfather, Henry Allen, served as a cook in the US Army in World War I in various locations in Europe. I think he didn’t go in as a cook; the army trained him. He and his co-worker, Bill Jones, cooked up millions of meals, tons of chili, mountains of mashed potatoes, and oceans of chipped beef. They were quite a team, Henry Allen and Bill Jones. Many years after the War ended, at least twenty years later, and all the soldiers had gone in their various directions, my grandfather took his family of five out to lunch at the Yankee Peddler Inn on Route five in Holyoke. They ordered the chili. When they were served and Henry had taken one bite of the food, he leaped out of his chair announcing loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear, “These are Jonesie’s beans!

He rushed out into the kitchen and there was his army buddy from the mess halls of World War I. The chili beans were so distinctive there was no mistaking them!

This is how distinctive Jesus hopes his follower's discipleship will be. Someone will see our extraordinary love, jump up out of their chair, and proclaim 'that's got to be one of Jesus' people!'

"You are the salt of the earth." A disciple of Jesus Christ is a bit of an oddity. I don't mean an odd ball. I mean someone with a different slant on what life is all about.

For example, a disciple is a person who is willing to believe in a promise of God or a teaching of Jesus long before there is any evidence to prove its wisdom. In the same sermon where Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," he also said, "Love your enemy." Now THERE'S a different slant on things. Being the salt of the earth means having a distinctive, transformative love for the one with whom we've been at odds. Those three words, 'Love your enemy,' are enough to make plenty of people say, 'no thank you; let someone else be the salt of the earth.'

What Jesus knew is that when we continue to hate those who differ from us, we simply feed the fires of destruction. But when someone dares to be different, dares to love the enemy, dares to reach out with respect for the one who is contrary, the possibility of a miracle has been planted. Jesus wasn't about maintaining the status quo, holding fast to our various prejudices. He was about bringing the Hatfields and the McCoys to the same table. He was about bringing Jews and Gentiles to the same feast. He was about giving love a chance to work its wonder-working power.

Without giving the disciples a mathematical formula to prove he was telling a truth, without the evidence of any laboratory research on loving the enemy, without presenting any empirical data from a textbook, Jesus asked his followers to take a leap of faith, to believe in him, to give it a try, to find a way to love the enemy, to throw their energies into building bridges rather than building walls. In so doing, they would be salt of the earth. In so doing, they would be distinctive in their discipleship, unmistakably Jesus' people.

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For example: a disciple is a person to whom it would never occur to lead by fear. Being salt of the earth is being a different kind of leader, not one who intimidates or oppresses or threatens or cajoles; but one who praises, one who celebrates achievements, one who leads by compassion, one who leads by humility. Salt of the earth leadership is distinctively different from the kind of leadership raised up in most cultures. In our Christian culture, salt of the earth leadership looks more like a New England town meeting than a royal decree, more like a foot washing ceremony than a lecture series, more like a sing-a-long than a concert with the spotlight on just one voice.

Whenever Jesus took the lead, he refused to use fear to play on people's insecurities. He had no tolerance for ultimatums or threats or intimidations. He led by invitation. Come, follow me. Come and see what new thing God is doing. Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden. Come, eat of the bread of life and be hungry no longer. Come.

To be the salt of the earth is to claim a leadership style that is distinctively different from that commonly witnessed in the halls of government or in the board rooms of some corporations or in the proverbial “backrooms” of shady establishments. To be salt of the earth is to lead by invitation, with transparency, with integrity, with no hidden agenda.

I would want our church to be known for conducting all its affairs with this style of leadership, that people in East Glastonbury and the north end of Glastonbury and the center of Glastonbury would be heard to say, ‘O those disciples down in South Glastonbury are the salt of the earth.’ Last Sunday, at our annual meeting, we elected officers and board chairs and committee co-chairs, leaders of many kinds. At one time or another most everyone here assumes a leadership role. Thus, those ancient words land on our hearts as they did on the hearts of the earliest disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.”

There is room in the spice rack for many different flavors. I am glad that curry is curry and that sage is sage and that basil is basil. Our calling is to be salt. Our calling is to be distinctively Christian. In the rock opera “Godspell,” there is a line that haunts us. It says, “If the salt has lost its flavor, it ain’t got much in its favor.” The grammar aside, this line from the opera gets us right to the heart of the truth. Jesus’ words have a ring of commandment to them, BE the salt of the earth. In the greatest of hope, Amen!

