



## Salty

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

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What tastes good to people is a matter of personal preference and cultural conditioning. Not everyone has a taste for snails or squid or chocolate-covered ants; I had a classmate in grade school who loved yellow mustard so much he put it on his PB&J. Even salt is, to some extent, an acquired taste.

Mom was not a salter. Oh, she put some in what she cooked, and we had a shaker, but none of us really ever seasoned food on the table, except corn on the cob. Since most kids, including me, don't care much for pepper, either, I remember sometimes wondering why salt and pepper sets were there, other than for decoration.

My world expanded rapidly in college. But I still remember being astonished when, as a freshman, the friend sitting next to me put salt on her green salad. That was just the beginning of my salt saga: Valerie, bless her heart, daughter of a physician, is a ferocious salter. She puts salt on everything -- first, before even tasting it.

Early in our marriage, I was the main cooker of meals in our home. Since I'd worked in restaurants, one of them even of a certain culinary level, I even considered myself pretty good at cooking. So I was a bit annoyed when Valerie kept telling me that my soups, stews, and such things lacked what she called "depth." Ladies, what creates "depth" in flavors? Stock, of course, and a large part of stock is salt. If you don't have stock, add more salt. Now that's still a bit much for me, but I have learned to appreciate what salt can do for food -- in fact, can't imagine food without it. I now put a pinch of salt in my oatmeal, for example; and I put more in the vegetables I cook. I even sprinkle it on my pasta, and I really lay it on popcorn!

For years, I thought that this comment Jesus makes in our lesson about salt that had to do with flavoring, and didn't make a whole lot of sense. For a non-salter, what's the big deal? And chemistry plays into it, too: after all, how can salt lose its saltiness? It's a chemical compound, made up of two nasty elements, sodium (a metal that burns if it comes in contact with water) and chlorine (a poisonous gas and bleaching agent).

Somehow, God put these two together, and they became the only rock that people eat: salt.

But a little more study makes clear that salt is one of a very small collection of things that is absolutely essential to life as we know it: oxygen, water, some sort of food, and salt. Salt is an integral part of us. Our bodies are salty, like our sweat, and we need to replenish it since we lose so much. We modern, Western people get it from lots of sources, but that's pretty new: it was extremely valuable not so long ago. The ancients sang its praises; it was the basis of the first recorded state monopoly (in China, thousands of years ago); it's often been used as money, and even has romantic overtones: a Roman man who was crazed by love was called *salax*, Latin for "salted." Salt was and is not only used to season food, it's also extensively used to preserve it (salt pork, salt fish, salt beef, et cetera). And it was used to purify things as well: Hebrew children were rolled in salt at birth, and it was used in many other rituals in dozens of cultures. The Roman Catholic Church still has, along with Holy Water and Holy Oil, Holy Salt. There are, I'm told, over 14,000 uses for common, everyday salt. Salt is a part of everything, it seems; salt changes things, transforms them: it seasons, it preserves, it purifies.

But the fact is, you can't unsalt salt. Salt is salt. It can't lose its saltiness. So, what's Jesus point? It has to do with what happens when we put things together.

If you're been here at Valley Presbyterian Church over the past year and a half or so, you have heard the Acts 16:5 Initiative mentioned – several times. And you have probably heard several explanations of what it is. It is, first and foremost, a way to transform the church by giving people opportunities to grow in faith and deepen their experience of God. In effect, salting them.

There's a story in the Old Testament of an anonymous Israelite girl, taken captive in battle, and made a slave to the wife of the general who took her captive. The general developed leprosy, and when the slave girl heard of it, she told her mistress about a prophet back home in Israel: "If only my master could see Elisha, he would be cured!" So the general got permission from his king, and went back to Israel – not to conquer, but for help. Elisha told him to immerse himself in the Jordan river seven times. The general at first refused – the rivers of his own country were better than the Jordan, he thought. But his aides urged him to do it anyway, reasoning that if Elisha had asked him to do something really hard, he'd have been happy to, so why not try something simple? It worked. And then Elisha would take no payment. Instead, the general ended up taking a donkey load of Israelite dirt back with him, because as he said: "I will never again worship any other God than the God of Israel."

Two things here: First, that slave girl owed the general nothing. She was a slave, in a powerless position, and she could so easily have just smiled knowingly to herself as watched him deteriorate from his horrific disease, got some revenge for what happened to her. But she spoke up, itself not an easy thing to do – she told what she knew: that her God, through Elisha, could help. Second, the general humbled himself, did the very simple thing he was told to do, and was cured. Not only was he cured, but converted.

The salt in that girl, child of God even though she was a slave of an enemy, seasoned her world: added depth, broke down the general's ego, humbled that very powerful man, showed that you can do things for God and others no matter where or what you are, and showed God's love in hers and God's actions; preserved his life and health, and purified him: introduced him – and many others -- to the true God.

Notice one other thing: here, God brought two incompatible circumstances together for a good that still adds depth to our faith.

The name Acts 16:5 comes from a Bible verse: “So the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers.” In the early days of the Christian movement, the excitement about God and what God was doing was contagious and drew people in – like a great new movie or book or restaurant or *whatever*, men and women were falling over themselves to get a piece of this amazing thing that was happening among those who followed this Jesus of Nazareth whose death and resurrection remade our relationship with God.

Now, you and I, we've been around this same faith all our lives, and, honestly, very few of us have that level of excitement. A very good reason why is that for those early Christians, everything was brand new. For most of us, Christianity's always been a part of us, sometimes even taken for granted. You may even wonder if there's anything new to know. One definition of the word “salty” is “experienced”: some of us may feel pretty salty!

But God is alive and active, doing and showing us new things if we're looking for them, using the salt in us to season, preserve, and purify. It's an awkward-sounding name, but the Acts 16:5 Initiative is about helping us as a church, a community of people, and as individual Christians, grow our faith and let it engage everything we do – giving us a chance to deepen our relationship with God. It lets us use that salt we've got in us, as much or as little as we want. And at the heart, it's simple and easy to be a part of.

Even in a big congregation like ours, the business of the church is really not *business*, it's God and doing God's work. Too often, churches get wrapped up in business and busy-ness, doing things – good things, yes, necessary things for the life of the congregation – and so the two tasks the church has to be about seem at odds with each other. How can they be brought together? It's easy to lose sight of the reason Valley Church exists: to serve God, to worship God, to share Christ.

Valley's Acts 16:5 team put that reason for being into a single sentence: “To know Christ and make him known through word and deed.” And we've put those words into practice. Nearly every group of this church has been introduced to the rhythm of “Word-Share-Prayer”, where, at the beginning of a gathering, the members read a passage of Scripture quietly, jot down the thoughts it triggers in their minds, then briefly share them together along with a prayer request for themselves or others. This only takes a few moments, but it colors everything that happens afterward: it reminds us what we're about. That gathering is growing in knowledge of Christ (by reading the word, Scripture), sharing what inspires them in it, and then putting what they learn into action, deeds, in prayer and what comes after (their meeting, and hopefully the rest of their day!).

It's just a different way of looking at things, adding depth and flavor to what we're already doing, like this cross here: the world is still out there, we can still see everything, but we're looking at it through the cross, through Christ. The more we put this into practice, the more obvious it seems and the more it shows. Anyone can do it, and anyone can grow in faith through this practice.

“To know Christ and make him known through word and deed.” Eleven words. Simple. And an easy way to see how the salt in us is seasoning, preserving, and purifying our experience. Experience is a hard thing to deal with, sometimes: what happens to us isn't always pleasant, easy, or obviously useful. Sometimes it's downright tragic, and we can't understand why; then sometimes it is beautiful beyond description. “Everyone will be salted with fire,” Jesus said; and although it sounds tough, fire, too, seasons, preserves, and purifies.

We have salt in us, Jesus says. And what is salt? Two toxic, seemingly incompatible substances, brought together in God's creation to make something wonderful, life-enhancing, even necessarily for life. Here's the point of Jesus' words: God has made us with salt in us, and God has made us his. We can't change that any more than a leopard can change its spots. Just as salt purifies, so we have been purified by Christ; as salt preserves, we have been preserved by Christ; as salt adds seasoning and depth, so Christ has done for us. And as that has been done for each of us, so each of us adds to each other, and our fellowship creates a wonderful, rich, deep and flavorful dish to serve the world.

Accept who and what it is you have within you, the depth and refining – the saltiness – that experience has given you, and join us all as we seek to know Christ and make him known in what we say and what we do, seasoning and preserving and purifying every part of life, wherever we go.