



**“The Spice of Life”**

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

February 6, 2011

Scripture – Matthew 5:13-16

Last May I flew to Oakland to visit my son Evans and his wife Emily for a few days. The week before I left, they sent me an E-vite to join them and some friends for Barbeque at SALT House the night I arrived. I sent a quick message back that I would be delighted. Now I know that barbeque here in Delaware simply means grilling hamburgers outside, but the name Salt House got my hopes up, resurrecting memories of the Salt Lick, a true bastion of barbeque which we enjoyed years ago in Texas. Evans picked me up at the airport and drove me to their house which they share with two other couples.

The housemates were busy straightening, and doing things in the kitchen. I wanted to tell them that they needn't go to so much trouble for me. After situating my suitcase, I waited for us to leave for the restaurant, until I finally realized that we were eating in – for they were making veggie kabobs and potato salad. Moreover, some neighbors and friends were stopping by. Wondering about the change of plans, I nonetheless offered to help grate carrots for the salad and set the table on the front porch. Later, in the middle of supper my eye caught sight of a chalk board inside the door. It read: Welcome to Salt House.

Later that night, I asked Emily, “So how did y'all decide to name your home Salt House?” And she answered, “Well, since we came together to form an intentional Christian community, we first thought of Jesus' words ‘You are the salt of the earth.’ Then we realized that SALT is an acronym for Six Adults Living Together, and that cinched it.” Needless to say, I did not feast on Texas style barbeque at Salt House in Oakland, but I did taste some excellent homemade sangria!

In our passage from Matthew, Jesus uses two everyday examples as metaphors to explain how his followers are to live. Salt and Light. We are somewhat familiar with the latter. It's an image which dates back to the prophet Isaiah who told Israel they were to be a light to the nations. For the past month, since Epiphany, the season of light, began January 6<sup>th</sup>, we have been hearing scriptures in the lectionary about light. John's gospel begins with a mystical description of Jesus as the Word of God who shines light into our world, light which can never be overcome by the darkness. In last week's sermon on the beatitudes, Dr. Jones explained that Jesus was preaching to the poor, the downtrodden and disadvantaged, and with every “blessed” he uttered, Jesus brought light and hope into the world of his listeners.

In today's passage Jesus links the blessings of the beatitudes with faith filled living. He asserts, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” The ‘you’ is plural, and

Jesus makes a pronouncement not a prediction. Having told the people how blessed, how *beloved* they are by God, Jesus now describes God's plan for their life. God intends you to be light in a world plagued with darkness. God sends you to be salt in a society which can become tasteless and tedious.

We know this image of light, understanding that our light comes from God and we are meant to be windows, or reflectors, of God's light and love in the world. But what does Jesus mean by comparing his disciples to salt?

In Jesus' day, salt was rare and hard to obtain, and considered a precious commodity. Roman soldiers were paid partially in salt, giving rise to the saying, "He is not worth his salt." Likewise, the word salary comes from the Latin word *salarium*, meaning "of salt." The Hebrews sprinkled salt on sacrifices in the temple and used it to seal covenants. Ancient peoples massaged on salt on newborn babies and used salt in healing. Sailors at sea rubbed salt into a wound to stave off infection. Until modern refrigeration, people used salt to preserve meats. And from early times cooks readily discovered that salt brought out the flavors of most any food.

In telling the story of her grandmother's life, writer Jeannette Walls describes a period when Grandma Lily had to feed a passel of ranch hands in Arizona. In her grandmother's voice she says, "I kept the cooking basic. Beans were my specialty. My recipe was fairly simple: boil beans, salt to taste. When we weren't having beans, we had steak. My recipe for steak was also fairly simple: Fry on both sides, salt to taste. With the steak came potatoes: boil unpeeled, salt to taste."<sup>i</sup> How many of our recipes today read "salt to taste!"

As a child I learned the magic quality of salt at breakfast. When I wanted to add more sugar to my oatmeal, Mother would suggest, "try shaking a bit of salt on it." How amazing to discover that salt could actually make something sweeter, bringing out the taste of the brown sugar!

According to Jeffrey Steingarten's book, *The Man Who Ate Everything*, we are the first generation to be paranoid about salt.<sup>ii</sup> Salt's recent bad rep stems from its excessive use in processed foods which can quickly inflate our sodium intake to four or five times more than the recommended 2400 milligrams per day. The remedy for those of us with hypertension is to buy fresh organic produce, prepare our own food, and salt lightly.

You veteran cooks know the miraculous properties of salt. Salt controls the ripening of cheese, strengthens the gluten in bread, preserves meats, and generally provides what Robert Farrar Capon calls "the music of cookery, the indispensable bass line over which all tastes and smells form their harmonies."<sup>iii</sup>

Listen again to verse 13, this time from Eugene Peterson's *Message* version:

*Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?*

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." You are valuable. You are a special ingredient. You are meant to bring out the God flavors of the earth. Your daily life is to elicit joy, release generosity, introduce selflessness, launch justice. You are to cleanse the wounds of the world – driving out prejudice, curing greed, ending enmity. Essentially Jesus tells his followers to act for God in ways as important and varied as salt was in their world.

We all remember the ad campaign years ago, “Where’s the beef?” Maybe we should ask ourselves “Where’s the salt?” For forty-five years we have watched a championship professional football game grow into a multi-billion \$ business with people today paying from 900 to several thousand dollars for a ticket to the game – and that’s not the scalper’s price! A 30-second ad is \$2.9 million.

Some South Carolina youth have given our culture a healthy dash of Salt with the Souper Bowl, clarifying God’s concern this day – caring for our neighbor, feeding the hungry. Since launching the Souper Bowl of Caring in 1990 they have inspired people to give more than \$70 million to local feeding programs all over the country. This year’s goal is \$11 million dollars. There’s the salt!

To be salt means mixing it up with the world. It means that for us to do our savory gospel task of making this world a better place, we need to be out there. Jesus is saying that if you’re going to live as his disciples, then it’s not enough to work inside the faith community, or to nurture a strong interior life of spirituality. No, God wants us to pour ourselves out on this earth so as to bring out life’s complex and beautiful flavors. Like salt, we are to scatter ourselves throughout the world bringing out the God flavors of love, joy, peace, compassion, faithfulness, kindness, humility, generosity. To be useful and true salt, we need to mix into the world, bringing with us gospel savor.

It is often easier for our lights to shine here among our sisters and brothers in faith, yet the light still needs to shine in the shadows of our world where despair reigns and hope dwindles. Likewise, salt that never leaves the shaker cannot add zing to your French fries,<sup>iv</sup> and disciples who never interact with strangers have no chance to share with them a taste of Christ’s unconditional love. God is to be tasted and seen by the spice of life and the light of life within us.

Friends, we too reside in SALT house for we are Scores of Adults Living Together, in God’s family, the church; and we are called to season the world with our daily lives, forever bringing out the exquisite flavors of God’s kingdom.

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<sup>i</sup> Jeannette Walls, *Half Broke Horses*. (New York: Scribner, 2009) p. 144.

<sup>ii</sup> Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary  
<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewArticle.php?aID=474>

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*