

Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalm 112:1-9

1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

It was a bit of a surprise to me when I moved to Nebraska and discovered that it was a Nebraskan that founded Arbor Day, but also this family had connections with Morton Salt. Julius Sterling Morton, of Nebraska City, founded Arbor Day, and his son Joy Morton founded Morton Salt. I remember as a little child seeing the round blue Morton salt boxes with the girl holding an umbrella in the rain and the words, "When it rains, it pours." It appears that Mr. Morton was very successful with the salt company. In the ancient world salt was a precious commodity. It was used as a method of trade and currency. Roads were built to make transportation of salt to Rome easier. Salt's ability to preserve food was a founding contributor to civilization. It helped to eliminate dependence on seasonal availability of food, and made it possible to ship some foods over long distances. Salt is a necessary ingredient for life. It is used to flavor food, and to preserve foods.

Jesus declared, "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus gave his disciples, gives us, a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth. Like salt, used to alter or enhance the tastes of food, the disciples' capacity to elicit goodness as they participated on the earth should be of profound consequences. To be salt means to live a flavoring, purifying, sacrificial way of life committed to the world's well-being and loyal to God's purpose. To be "salt of the earth" means that the earth is our sphere of action and the object of our mission. This is where the disciples live, where you and I live, in the midst of the poor in spirit, the mourning, the powerless, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those dominated and exploited by the ruling elite. This is where the

community embodies God's empire in mercy, purity, peacemaking, and persecution as it lives its alternative existence.

Jesus warns us not to lose our saltiness. Salt can lose its saltiness when it is overwhelmed by or mixed with larger quantities of other materials. One commentator explains that the ancient Israelite house would surround a courtyard. In that courtyard, among other items, would be an earthen oven and a dung heap. The earthen ovens used dung as fuel. The dung heap was salted, and salt plates were used as a catalyst to make the dung burn. This salt lost its saltiness when the exhausted plates no longer served to facilitate burning. In Luke's version of this story. Luke specifies that salt without saltiness is "fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile." Salt that has lost its taste, salt that has lost its saltiness, is of no use. It is no longer good for anything.

For us as a community of faith, to lose our saltiness refers to behavior that is contrary to God's will. The community of disciples loses its identity as salt when it ceases to live in the world based on God's reign. The Beatitudes, that we looked at last week, describe God's reign. If we are not merciful, not meek, if we do not hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we are not peacemakers, then we have lost our saltiness.

Our reading from Isaiah gives us further illumination of God's reign, of our identity as salt. Evidently the Israelites felt that God was ignoring them, for they asking God, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice." They were pious people, practicing pious acts, but it seemed like God could not care any less. It seemed as though God was ignoring them. Why they thought God was ignoring them, we don't know. However, it is evident here that the Israelites believed that the purpose of worship was to gain advantage with God. Worship had become

instrumental. God is useful for advantage. God responds, “Your piety means nothing if you don’t practice justice. You look to your own interest and you oppress your workers. This is the fast I choose, these are the acts of piety I want to see you practice: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless into your house, to cover the naked, and not hide yourself from your kin. In the words of the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “The God of Judaism is not a God who likes to be flattered in a more or less passive routine of worship; this God is out working the neighborhood and wants all adherents doing the same.” Because Israel had failed to be loyal to God’s purpose, they had lost their saltiness.

The prophet was instructed by God to shout out, to not hold back, to lift up his voice like a trumpet, and to declare to Israel their “rebellion,” their ignoring God’s demand for justice, and caring for the poor and vulnerable. The church must also shout out, not hold back. When we are silent, when we refuse to shout out, when we refuse to lift up our voice, the community of disciples, the church, you and I, have lose our saltiness. It is very easy be silent when we are scared, when the world seems to be very, very dark. When we see the vulnerable being trampled, we are unwilling to run out into the streets and demand an end to injustice and oppression. We have all heard stories of people witnessing crimes, watching people being assaulted from the windows of their homes, and not doing anything about it, not even calling the police or 911. We want to get off the streets and seclude ourselves in our homes. As Desmond Tutu, a retired Anglican bishop in South Africa, said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice,

you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

Jill Duffield, editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, shares a story of when we are silent, when we refuse to shout out for justice. Before World War II, there was strong America-first sentiment at that time. There was little energy for admitting European Jews into the United States during a time when Hitler was still letting Jewish people leave - a narrow window of escape. The United States denied boatloads of refugees the ability to come ashore, sending those people back to their deaths. You all know to what I am referring. However, even if you agree to what Trump is doing, the point is the church dare not lose its saltiness. As Jill Duffield suggests, “We are to be as aggravating and irritating as salt in the wound of those who seek to hurt and destroy on God’s holy mountain.”

It does not take a lot of salt to flavor food. To be the salt of the earth means that what the people of God do in the world, what you and I do in the world, really counts. It does make a difference! Helping to feed the hungry at Tabitha, a missionary doctor giving vaccinations to children in a third-world country, a team of Christians building a Habitat for Humanity home. All of these do make a difference. Writing letters or calling members of congress and the President, participating in a protest march against injustice, writing a letter to the editor, volunteering for an organization that is working for justice, these acts make a difference. That is what makes us salty. May the church never be put on a salt-free diet!

Praise the Lord!
Happy are those who delight in God’s word. Amen.