

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” You may be seated.

Good morning everyone.

I grew up hearing my parents describe some of their friends as “salt of the earth.” I believe my parents meant that these folks were honest, reliable, and stable. They had the right values and lived by them. That was, of course, something to admire, though my dad at one time said with exasperation that he wished some of these friends were a little more fun!

When Jesus speaks about his followers being the “salt of the earth,” I think he means they are compassionate people who serve others. They are people who feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and for those who have been mistreated. They are people who work to end oppression.

This understanding of discipleship is presented clearly in the passage from Isaiah that we’ve just heard. Isaiah says disciples ACT on behalf of the needy. The Lord has no interest in fasting that is not connected with service. Similarly, Psalm 112 says that those who lend generously and give freely to the poor are the righteous – the upright who will be richly blessed.

Let’s consider why Jesus compares his disciples to salt. Salt is a valuable commodity. It is essential to human life. We couldn’t do without sodium.

If you’re like me, you have at least one “cooking without salt” cookbook in your kitchen. You buy low-salt items at the grocery store and you avoid salting your food at the table. It’s not

good for people to eat too much salt, especially people with high blood pressure. However, we should not lose sight of the importance of salt for us and for the people of Jesus' day.

Did you know that salt is needed to transmit nerve impulses, to contract and relax muscles, and to maintain the proper balance of water and minerals in the body? For food, salt provides flavor, acts as a binder, and serves as a preservative, keeping food from spoiling for an extended period of time. Bacteria can't thrive in the presence of a high amount of salt.

In the ancient world, salt was so valuable that it was considered a currency. It was used as both a purifier and a fertilizer for soil. Salt was and is the substance that is able to make other things good.

In our gospel today, Jesus tells us that his faithful followers are to be like salt – having a positive impact on the world. They are essential. They bring purity, usefulness, and the flavor of goodness into the human community. Their efforts truly make a difference.

"You are the salt of the earth, Jesus says to the believers. He doesn't say to become salt. His message is that by virtue of being a disciple (being baptized), each of us already IS salt.

I suggest to you this morning that the parishioners here at Christ Church are already "salt of the earth." As a parish, we're already bringing much goodness into the greater community. Consider all of CEC's outreach.

Just glance at the back pages of our leaflet. There is the Somos Amigos medical ministry in the Dominican Republic. There is a mission trip for Dream Builders to repair homes

in Kentucky. Our parish supports Columbia Community Care with diapers and other essentials. We donate food to FISH Howard County. We serve meals at the Dorsey Community Resource Center in Jessup. We support an Afghan refugee family that is settling in our area. And the list goes on. All of this outreach is one of the reasons that my husband Ray and I decided to join this congregation.

But, here's where the gospel gets complicated. Jesus encourages us with affirmation but also issues a warning. "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything..." This statement is hard to understand because salt does NOT lose its flavor or properties over time. It never loses its usefulness.

It is tempting to think that Jesus means we should do more service – take on more projects, spend more time volunteering. Society so often tells us that we're not DOING enough. That thinking weighs on us. But, I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at. I believe he is more concerned with the WAY that we serve – the attitudes behind our actions.

Perhaps we lose our saltiness when we lose our humility – when we get hung up on ourselves even as we serve others. It's easy to let our egos get in the way.

Years ago, when I was working with youth at a different church, I got so discouraged that I quit. I was frustrated, dealing with wise-cracking ninth grade boys. They wouldn't take any learning activities that I had planned seriously. All they wanted to do was play basketball, eat, and roughhouse with each other. They didn't even show up consistently. I started asking myself why I was putting in the effort with them. I felt like a failure. There was something I wasn't doing right. I had no satisfaction in teaching them.

One of those young men caught up with me at church one Sunday years later when he was getting ready to graduate from high school. Much to my surprise, he told me how much Youth Group meant to him. He had even become a student retreat leader. I was floored. Something must have gotten through to him. I realized I could have stayed around to see his development if my pride hadn't gotten in the way.

Father Thomas Keating, who was a well-known Trappist monk, explained in one of his many books that it is easy to be working for yourself, thinking that you are working solely for God. He said, "The first stage of the spiritual journey...consists in becoming aware of how our unconscious needs affect ordinary daily life including our service of God. It is unsettling for us to realize that, mixed in with our good intentions, are...infantile attitudes." We are self-conscious. We may be looking for reassurance, for recognition, for a boost to our self-esteem, or for control. It's hard to admit that we all begin with a hidden agenda in carrying out our service.

When we disciples begin to understand ourselves as humble instruments for the Holy Spirit, our service can be powerful. When we acknowledge that the Spirit is in charge and not us, wonderful things can happen. There's no need to worry about our accomplishments. It's not really about us! We can be open and allow God to make use of the talents and skills we have for the good of others, in whatever way God sees fit. We can trust the process.

How do we cultivate humility? How do we maintain our saltiness? We can go deeper in prayer and meditation. We can draw closer to God. We can ask for the grace to surrender our agendas. We can seek spiritual growth.

Father Keating said, "There arises a new kind of activity which might be called "contemplative service." Contemplative service is service that comes from the experience of the divine indwelling – from the Spirit living and at work within us. It is God in us serving God in others."

Contemplative service leads to satisfaction. Isaiah says, "You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." We disciples are promised abundant living!

As we continue our Christian service, our ministry to others in the name of Jesus, let us ground our actions in humility. As St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Let our faith rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." Let us say with the newly baptized that we put our whole trust in God's love. We will be richly blessed!

AMEN