

5th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Salt, Light and Discipleship”

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Jesus says that we are called to be salt of the earth. In recent decades, salt has gotten a bad reputation because of the health concerns associated with too much salt in our diet. Every time I visit a nutritionist, I am encouraged to limit the amount of salt in my diet. I mean, who doesn't like salt, raise your hand? Salt is one of the basic tastes we have and a certain amount of it is important for health and even survival. Our culture just gets too much of it and so salt has become another four letter word. However, if we take a moment and look historically at the importance of salt, Jesus invitation to be the salt of the earth will make more sense.

First of all, in ancient times, salt was considered an important preservative. They didn't have refrigerators other than what they could manage with underground pantries so when we discovered how salt could extend the shelf life of food, creating edible salt became a very important and lucrative business. Over time, salt therefore became an important item for trade between countries and was even traded as a kind of currency. As a result, it is interesting how often you find the word salt in many of the common words we use. For instance, the word “salary” believe it or not comes from word for salt. Your pay would be reflected by how much salt you earned for the day. The word “salad” comes from the word for salt in reference to the old practice of salting leafy vegetables. Take that nutritionists! Even the name given for the city of “Saltzburg” literally means “salt city” because of the importance of the salt industry throughout their history.

Some of you may recall from your history class that Mahatma Gandhi led at least 100,000 people on what was called the "Dandi March" in which protesters made their own salt from the sea. Under British rule, this was illegal because it allowed people to avoid paying the "salt tax". This act of disobedience played a big part in the movement towards India's independence. There are a number of museums in Europe that go into detail about the role of salt in the continent's history and politics.

Getting back to our Gospel reading, salt was also very important in many religious practices. You see its use in ancient Egypt burial customs. You see its use in the Old Testament with regard to legally binding covenants and sacrifices offered on the altar. Even in our faith tradition, to this day there is still an option in the rite of blessing holy water that includes adding a little salt. There is a special prayer that goes along with that practice. All of this information is meant for us to have a deeper understanding of what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel reading.

So when Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth, what he is inviting us to consider is, by becoming disciples that proclaim the Kingdom of God in word and deed, we become the preservative that keeps the world from spoiling. Get it? He is also saying that by proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel by the example of our lives, we will give the world in which we live in better taste. Just as food tastes better with salt, the world tastes better when people live the Gospel. See it?

Our first reading from Isaiah does a good job at articulating what this can look like. He says, “Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked when you see them and do not turn your back on your own... then your light shall break forth like the dawn.” He continues...”remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech, if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted...then light shall rise for you in the darkness”.

And so Jesus also invites us to consider, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. People shouldn’t light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. The lamp should be placed on a lamp stand to give light to the whole house.” Jesus continues, “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” I cannot help but draw attention to the Eucharistic implication here. If we believe Jesus is fully present in the Holy Communion we receive at Mass today, and if mom is right when she says we are what we eat, then we are called as a Eucharistic people to become Christ to the world.

We can ask ourselves, what does this look like in my interactions at work, in my interactions at school, in my interactions with family members, what does this look like at a parish level or even in how I care for my own body and soul? What Jesus is saying is, it is not enough to simply say we are disciples. Discipleship must look like something. Discipleship looks like a city shining on a hill. Discipleship looks like a lamp giving light to a household. Discipleship looks a preservative that keeps the world from spoiling. Discipleship is the spice that makes life taste better.