

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 6, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Putting some flavor into our lives

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth"

One day early last week there appeared an article in the Gazette about the dangers of salt consumption. It seems we use too much of it in our cooking. There's too much salt in the products we buy at the market, and some of us are too vigorous with the shaker when we are served our food. That's me. When nobody is looking I shake salt on everything. I am reminded that this is not only bad for my health, but an insult to the cook. Lord, have mercy!

In the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel, we learn that when Jesus saw the crowds that were following, he went up on the mountain, sat down and taught them some things. The result was history's most often quoted and best remembered discourse. We call it the **Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5:1-12)**

He began by describing blessedness. "Blessed are those who know their need of God," he told them, "The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." You remember the others: "Blessed are the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, the pure in heart, and the peace makers." That was last Sunday's sermon.

When Jesus finished his description of the blessed ones, he looked at all of those people and told them that they were "the salt of the earth"..... What a perfectly beautiful thing for Jesus to have said to those people! Of course, when he said that no one knew about the dangers of salt.

There they were, great crowds of people, no doubt sweaty hot, and bone tired. They had been trudging after the Lord up hill and down dale through Galilee. They probably needed a bath, and most of them knew that they were not much good at being meek, merciful, or pure in heart. They may have longed for that blessedness that Jesus spoke about, but they knew that there was very little of it in their lives. But, never mind, Jesus looked at them and said, "You are the salt of the earth."

A number of years ago I went to a stress management workshop for clergy. We were all suffering from burn out. We were wondering if what we were doing was of any use to our parishioners, and most of us were suffering from a lack of self esteem. Those are common problems among the clergy.

The leader of the workshop at once perceived our problem. She said a number of helpful things, most of which I can no longer remember. But one thing she told us that I will never forget. She said, you priests and pastors, are a precious treasure. You bring joy and peace into the lives of people that you don't even know about. You are worth your weight in gold.... Considering my weight at the time, that was a most generous affirmation! Her's was the voice of Christ

telling us that we were the salt of the earth. We all went home with our spiritual batteries re-charged and ready to build the kingdom.

When Jesus told those people on the mountain side that they were the salt of the earth, he provided us with an expression which has come to be one of our greatest compliments. When we wish to tell of someone's usefulness and goodness, we will say, "People like that are the salt of the earth."

The most obvious quality of salt is that it gives flavor to things. Ask anyone on a low salt diet, and they will tell you that food without salt is pretty bland and insipid.

Jesus was telling those folks that following his guidelines to blessedness would put flavor into their lives. Indeed the faith we call Christianity *should* put flavor into our lives. But does it?

I suspect that for some of us it does just the opposite. Twenty one years ago the General Convention of the Episcopal Church named the 1990's "the decade of evangelism". This aroused some wistful feelings in me. My grandparents called the final decade of the 19th century "The Gay Nineties". Of course, for them word "gay" didn't bear the implications it does today.

My grandmother was a real child of the gay nineties. She liked to get dolled up in pretty clothes. She loved to dance. She enjoyed a cocktail at the end of the day. She went to the horse races, and was sometimes known to sit in a good poker game until the dawn's early light. The gay nineties were the age of Lillian Russell and Diamond Jim Brady. And frankly they sound much more spicy than the Evangelical Nineties. So much of what the Church promotes seems to have about it a stern aroma. There's not much joy.

A lot of what has come to be associated with the Faith takes the flavor out of life.

A.C. Swinburne put his finger on it when he said, "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath."

After Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, there followed the Emperor Julian who was nostalgic for the old gods. According Henrik Isben, Julian asked, "Have you looked at these Christians closely? Hollow-eyed, pale cheeked, flat breasted all. They brood their lives away, unspurred by ambition. The sun shines for them, but they do not see it. The earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not. All of their desire is to renounce and to suffer that they may come to die." As Julian saw it, Christianity took the flavor out of life.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that he might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen he knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.

Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary something that he considered quite extraordinary: "I've been to Church today, and I am not depressed".

All of this suggests that we need to rediscover the blessedness, the joy, and the saltiness of the Christian life.

In recent years the press has been full of reports about the decline of the Christian Church. One pundit has written that “Mainline Protestants (why don’t I like that name?) such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Congregationalists have lost more than a quarter of their adherents in the past two decades.”

One Episcopalian has written, “The future of the Church is bleak. The relentless decline in numbers, the loss of coherence and identity, our bitter fragmentation, and a leadership seemingly unable to rise above clichés bode ill. We are adrift...”

What he is saying is that we have become flavorless and insipid. If the Church is going to grow we must rediscover the lost radiance of Christianity. We need to put the salt back into the Faith.

In a troubled and frightened world, the Christian should remain serene. In a depressed world, the Christian should remain full of the joy of life.

Again to quote Robert Louis Stevenson:

*Away with funereal music, set
The pipe to powerful lips—
The cup of life's for him that drinks
And not for him that sips.*

There should something intoxicating about Christianity –a sparkle about us! But too often we look like mourners at a funeral and talk like a specter at a wake. Wherever Christians are they should be the salt of the earth, the dispensers of joy, the ones who add flavor to the occasion.

That’s what we love about St. Mark’s. We are growing, and I believe that is because we are a salty congregation.

Salty Christians know two things about themselves: They are the fallen children of Adam. We know that there is a built-in cussedness in us all. But we also know that we are created in the image of God—more beautiful than the angels and so much loved that Christ gave his life for us.

We also know two things about the world around us: It is filled with suffering and frustration, pain and poverty. There are many valleys shrouded in the shadow of death. But we also know that when God created the world—the sunlight, the ocean, the green things that grow, the creatures of the forest, and the laughter of little children, behold it was very good. It was given to us to enjoy and to celebrate.

We also know two things about the Church: It is a human family, well-supplied with eccentrics, critics and gossips. The Church is no stranger to self-serving politics, and there have been many

casualties in the dark hallways of organized religion. But the Church is also the creation of God. We believe that Christ died for her. It is the community where we gather to celebrate our many blessings, the greatest of them being the love of God. We are in a fellowship called to demonstrate that love, however haltingly, for one another and toward the world around us.

The Church is where we are invited to a table to be nourished by God's love under the forms of bread and wine.

When the sun shines through these windows, it brings the dust and finger prints into focus, but it also brings light and warmth into our lives.

Joseph Hayden was once asked why his Church music was so cheerful. He replied, "When I think upon God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap, as it were, from my pen. And since God has given me a cheerful heart it will be pardoned me that I serve him with a cheerful spirit."

The blessedness of which Jesus spoke and the saltiness which he claims for us is to see the divine side of our fellow humans. It is to see the beauty of the earth. And it is to rejoice in the Grace imparted in the Church. It is to say—or better yet, to sing—Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen