



Salt of the Earth

St. Matthew 5:13

Fr. William Klock

July 27, 2008 – Trinity 10

Let's begin this morning with a little review. Two weeks ago we wrapped up the Beatitudes – the first part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Do you all remember how Jesus described the character of the Christ-follower there? Okay, so first, the Christian is poor in spirit – he knows that there's nothing truly good in himself and that he can't save himself; he needs the goodness, the righteousness, of another; he mourns – not just his own unrighteousness, but he mourns the sin he sees around him; because he understands that he himself is damned without Christ's righteousness, he mourns the fact that without Christ, those around him face eternal death; he's meek – he knows that he's got nothing to lord over anyone; he knows that any personal rights he might have once thought he had have been swallowed up by the great privilege he has to share the Gospel with others – one beggar showing another beggar where to find life-giving bread; he hungers and thirsts for righteousness – he knows his need and hungers for the righteousness that Christ offers him, and not only that, but like a starving man craves bread and a thirsty man craves water, the Christian craves to follow the example that Christ has set before him out of gratitude to his Saviour; he's merciful – he understands just how much Christ has given him, and so he approaches others with the same mercy he has been shown; he's pure in heart – in his quest for righteousness, he sets aside ungodliness and allows the Spirit to purify him from the inside out; he's a peacemaker – not just a man who runs away from a fight, but one who seeks to bring reconciliation, first between men and God, and then naturally between man and man; and finally, because his character is so at odds with the natural character of fallen humanity, the Christian finds himself persecuted because he has put off his old self and put on Christ in its place.

In that last Beatitude, Jesus springboards from the character of the Christian right

into the deep water – into the Christian's function in the world. The world persecuted and finally crucified Jesus for being who he was. If we model his behaviour, if we conform to his image, the world will persecute us too.

Think of St. Stephen, the first martyr, who as the Jews gathered around and began throwing stones at him cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60), or St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who was dragged into the arena and before the Roman proconsul and commanded to deny his faith in Christ. The proconsul threatened him first, saying that he'd be torn to shreds by wild beasts if he refused, and then threatened to burn him at the stake on the spot. And Polycarp stood firm, praying for those who lit the fires around him as he was consumed by them. In their deaths, the martyrs were witnesses of the faith – in fact, that's what the Greek word, *martureo*, means: *to witness or to testify* – to show the world what Christ has done for you. And Church history abounds with stories of those who were drawn to Christ by the witness and testimony of those who stood firm in the faith, even to the point of death.

And so Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:13:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

If we live out the character Jesus has described, then we *are* "the salt of the earth." Notice: it's not that Jesus is telling us that we need to be the salt of the earth or that he'll gradually make us the salt of the earth, but that we *already are* the salt of the earth. This isn't another Christian characteristic to put on, it's what we *are* if we're doing all the other things he's told us. Being salt is the function of the Christian in the world.

So why does the world need salt? Well, the world's ultimate problem is that it's rotting. God created it perfect, but from the time of Adam's first sin, from the time of his first act of rebellion against his loving creator, the world has been progressing into increasingly greater corruption. All you have to do is go back to the first few chapters of Genesis. Adam sinned in Chapter 3 and by Chapter 6 the *entire* human race had fallen into sin so terrible that God's only solution was to wipe it all away, saving only Noah and his

family – the last people on earth who still followed him. That's been our story as a race over and over again. God shows us his loving care and we respond selfishly with our sin – our cosmic treason against our Creator – and it only seems to get worse with every year that goes by. The world is full of corruption – it's rotting.

And so Jesus uses a very apt metaphor: he says that we're the "salt of the earth." Think about that in terms of what salt does.

First, salt is a preservative. Our ancestors, in the days before refrigeration, used salt to cure meat so that it would last on a long sea voyage, or on a long overland trip by wagon, or even to keep it through a long northern winter when meat would otherwise become scarce. Even today we still eat things like jerky, or for you South Africans, biltong. In fact, from what I hear, if biltong is cured right and made very dry it will last indefinitely – because of the salt used to cure it. Without the salt-curing process meat doesn't last – within a day it'll start to rot and putrefy.

The world, just like a piece of meat left out in the sun, is slowly rotting. Nothing's ultimately going to reverse the rottenness of the world, but a little spiritual salt will slow down the process, or even halt it for a little while. That's what salt does. It needs to be spread around and rubbed in, but when that happens it has a preserving effect. Think of the way the world so often reacts to the presence of a Christian. I've noticed that when faced with the witness of a faithful follower of Christ – of one who is truly characterised by the Beatitudes – many men will put away their sins. I've seen men clean up their language and stop taking God's name in vain, because the witness of a Christian reminds them that it's wrong. I remember one particularly profound example that happened to me just last year. My company was engaged in an unethical business practice and by necessity I ended up being forced to take part in it. I said no, but my supervisor insisted that I follow instructions. So I went to the C.E.O. I was scared. I was sure I was going to lose my job, but I couldn't do what they wanted me to do. And the funny thing was that as I left the C.E.O.'s office, I realised that just as I was scared to bring the issue to him – since the unethical policy had started with him – he was just as scared of having the "Padre" confront him about it. You see, men and women often justify their sin, or they get

so into it that they sear their consciences and reach a point where they no longer see their sin as sin, but when the faithful Christ-follower comes along, he raises the bar, opens their eyes, and shows their sin for what it is – when you see real righteousness in front of you, it tends to re-sensitise your deadened conscience. The Christian’s righteousness condemns sinful men and women by example. And that leave the non-Christian with two choices: persecute the Christian to remove the source of condemnation, or follow the Christian’s example to avoid it.

Think about the preserving influence that Christians have had on society over the years. England was ripe for a godless revolution just like the one that swept France – the revolution that tried to kill God and the Church – but instead of a revolution a great evangelical revival happened under men like John Wesley and George Whitefield. Why have countries like Canada and the United States managed to retain much of our Christian foundation? Because for centuries Christians were being salt – they were working their way into our society and into our culture. We may be living on borrowed capital at this point, but we have what we have, because our forefathers were the salt that Jesus describes here in St. Matthew’s Gospel.

Now salt not only preserves, but it also seasons and flavours. I always loved my grandmother’s cooking, but it suddenly changed after my grandfather’s third heart attack. He was put on a no-salt diet. And you know what? Butter with no salt in it doesn’t have any flavour. Neither do eggs, or vegetables, or meat. It had never occurred to me just how much flavour salt brings out in our food. Without it, everything turns bland.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life and have it *abundantly*.” We were once sinners and enemies of God, but he loving redeemed us by the death of Jesus Christ and for that reason we should be a people full of joy! God himself, the one we offended and committed treason against, chose to reconcile us to himself. How much better does it get than that? Well, it does! He not only saved us from punishment and from his own wrath, but he gives us his Spirit to indwell us – to renovate our hearts and minds – to make us new creatures. Remember that one of the fruit

of the Spirit is joy! But as the Spirit works in us, as it plants and grows its fruit in us, the world through us comes to know not only divine joy, but divine love, divine goodness, and divine peace. As God’s salt, we flavour an otherwise rotting piece of meat with the characteristics of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit does this through us in order to point the world to Christ. The ministry of the Spirit is to give witness to Jesus Christ. As Holy Spirit salt we flavour the world so that people can “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Think of our being salt in terms of our speech. In Colossians 4:6, St. Paul tells us, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.” What does that mean? Well, in Ephesians 4:29 he also tells us, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” What’s interesting is that Paul tells us this in the context of telling us not to grieve the Holy Spirit. You see, our speech is one of the best measurements of the condition of our spirit. Our speech is capable of doing a lot of harm, but it can also lift the spirits of the discouraged. It can put the whole of life in a new perspective. And, most importantly, it’s the vehicle by which Christ is made known – but notice that it’s not only by what we say, but by *how* we say it.

Speech is like salt: not enough, and you can’t taste the flavour of the food; too much, and all you’re left with is the terrible taste of salt – the food is ruined. So just like salt, our speech and our lives should bring out the “flavour” of Jesus Christ. Too much of ourselves – too much of our talk – will ruin the message and leave a bad taste. We need to be like Christ or else people won’t be able to tell the difference between the salt and the meat, between the poverty of our witness and the goodness of the Lord Jesus that we’re inviting them to taste.” So ask yourself, are you imparting the “flavour” of Jesus Christ to the world? Do people see your joy? Do they see God’s love and God’s peace in you? Does your speech and do your actions build people up? You see, that’s what salt does as it witnesses Christ to the world.

But now Jesus asks, “If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” It’s a good question. I don’t really think

Jesus’ point was to get into a chemistry lesson with those people gathered there to hear him preach, so I’ll keep the chemistry lesson short. Sodium chloride – salt – is one of the most stable chemical compounds there is. Under normal circumstances, salt is salty and salt doesn’t change into anything else. It’s stable. Salt likes to be salt. Salt stays salt. I think it’s likely that the people listening to Jesus knew this. They never expected to open up the salt pot in their house and find that the salt had changed into something else anymore than any of us expect to shake the salt shaker and find anything other than salt coming out. If we are salt – and we *are* salt by the very virtue our being followers of Christ, living out the Beatitudes – we *can’t* cease to be salt. And here’s the scary implication: If you’re not salt – if you’re not having a preserving influence on the rotten world around you – then it’s probably because you’re not really following Christ. You see, this is the same principle we see throughout Holy Scripture. It’s not enough to say you’re a Christian – you have to actually be one. Your life has to back up your talk. You have to walk the walk. St. James tells us that talk is cheap – he says, “If you want to prove you have faith, show me your works – show me that Jesus has changed your life and your way of living.” Jesus tells us that he’s the vine and we’re the branches – and he says that every branch that doesn’t bear good fruit will be cut off and thrown into the fire. *If you have Jesus, you will bear fruit. If there’s no fruit, it’s evidence that you don’t have Jesus.* If the salt isn’t salty, it’s not really salt – it’s dust and it might as well be thrown out into the road with the other dust.

You see in Jesus day and place they got their salt from the banks of the Dead Sea. But when they scraped it up, they got as much dust as they did salt. Since salt is water-soluble it was pretty easy to separate the two – dust doesn’t dissolve in water. So the people understood what Jesus was talking about. Until you separate them, the salt and the dust look pretty much the same – the difference is in the taste and the effect. Dust isn’t salty. It doesn’t have a preserving influence. It doesn’t flavour or add zest – its just dust. So you have to ask: are you salt or are you just worthless dust masquerading as salt? Salt gets used and makes a difference.

Dust gets thrown into the street and walked all over.

But here's another problem with salt. Under the right conditions it's absorbent. It's like when they put down kitty litter at the gas station to soak up spilled gas or oil. Salt does the same thing. The best example I can think of is the use of salt to clean a pipe. When you smoke a pipe you build up a layer of ash and soot on the inside of the bowl. Now you want that layer to be good and thick – it makes the pipe smoke better. The problem is that that ash soaks up oil from the tobacco and eventually that oil gets rancid and sour. So to get rid of it without messing with the layer of ash and soot, you fill the pipe bowl with salt, saturate it with some ethanol, and let it sit. Overnight it dries out, but in the process the ethanol breaks down the rancid and sour oil and the salt absorbs it all. In the morning you've got a bunch of orangey-brown salt that isn't fit for anything but the trash.

See, Jesus calls us to be *in* the world, but he also calls us *not* to be of the world. I don't think most of us have a problem being in the world. Our problem is that we end being of the world too. As salt we start to let the world soak into us. Now think of that nasty orangey-brown sticky salt that comes out of a pipe. Would you put that on your eggs? Would you rub into a piece of ham to flavour and preserve it? No. It would ruin the eggs and it would ruin the ham.

Think of it this way. Maybe you're still salt, but you've let the dust settle back in by being too worldly. Try putting dusty salt on your eggs. Okay, so the salt might bring out some flavour, but who wants to eat dusty eggs? It's counter productive. But you see, that's what happens when, as salt, we let the world contaminate us. We lose our effect. We lose our impact for preservation. We produce a product that nobody wants and that's counter productive if we try to apply it the way we would real, pure salt.

Now, there's another important aspect of salt that we haven't looked at yet. Our bodies contain a lot of salt, because salt helps us with water retention. But if too much salt builds up in your body, or if your body stops getting rid of salt through sweat, your body retains too much water, gets bloated, and becomes very unhealthy.

And so does the Church if it doesn't spread it's salt around. Think of this salt shaker. It might look nice sitting here all filled with salt, but the salt isn't having any effect. *You have to shake the salt out.* And that's how we need to be as Christians. There are times when it's good for us to be all together like the salt in the shaker, but we also need to spend time out in the world. In a sense, we gather to reinforce our saltiness, but then we need to go out and be the salt of the earth. There are things that the Church, as the *corporate* Body of Christ, is good at and then there are things that are better done by *individual* Christians.

The Church can get together in councils and synods and make all sorts of pronouncements to the world, but if you look at history, the Church's track record at being a preserving influence isn't very good when that's all that it did. The periods in history when the Church had the greatest preserving influence were the times when individual Christians went *out* and got involved in the work of personal evangelism. Think about it this way. I can rub this salt shaker on a piece of meat all day, but if that's all I do, I won't do anything to preserve the meat. To preserve the meat you have to shake the individual salt crystals out so that they can get out and spread out over the whole piece of meat. I can set the shaker on top of my eggs, but that won't flavour the eggs – you have to shake the salt out of the shaker for it to do any good. You see, the Church can make pronouncements about the sinfulness of things like abortion or homosexuality, but none of those evils are going to disappear unless real people meet the real Jesus who takes away their sins. Too often we take the easy way out: we make pronouncements or we work to pass moralising legislation, forgetting that men and women won't change without Christ. If the Church spends all her time preaching against this segment or that segment of society, she usually ends up doing nothing more than closing the evangelistic door to that segment of society. That's like rubbing the salt shaker on the meat. We need to remember that each person in each of those segments of society that we're prone to preach against has an individual soul that needs to be saved. If we go out as individuals into the places where God has put us, we can show the love of God toward sinners and save those individual souls one by one.

Let me close with a real-world example of what it means for God's people to be salt. The great English Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter, wrote one of the finest books ever on the ministry and I think the world and the Church would be very different if we all held Baxter's view of the Church's ministry. In 1647 he was sent to the parish of Kidderminster, and when he got there he found that out of the hundreds of people in the town, you could count the actual Christians on your hands. He engaged in an active ministry of doing whatever it took to go out to the people, to meet them at home and work, to share the Gospel with them, and to teach them about the faith and about the Bible. As people came to Christ they began to do the same themselves. As Bill Hedges is fond of saying, "Sheep make more sheep." It's said that by the time Baxter left Kidderminster fourteen years later, of the hundreds there, you could count on your hands the number of people who *weren't* Christians. When he arrived immorality was rampant, when he left Kidderminster it was a model Christian community. But you see, Baxter didn't just stand in the pulpit and make pronouncements about the evils of the town. No, he went out and made Christians, who made more Christians, who made more Christians, and together they became a preserving influence – and by the time Baxter left, the entire character of the town had changed. That, dear friends, is precisely what we need to do in the Comox Valley, in Vancouver Island, and ultimately to all of Canada and the rest of the world.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we prayed earlier in the Collect of the Day, asking you to teach us to ask for those things that please you, so that we may obtain those things for which we ask. Father, this is one thing we know you desire and that we can confidently ask for, knowing it to be according to your will: Make us salt and give us boldness to spread ourselves throughout our community and the rest of the world. Let us be your preserving influence that will flavour the Comox Valley with your grace, and let us with boldness spread the good news of Jesus Christ, who died, was resurrected, ascended, and now reigns on high, that all the world might come to know you through our words and Christ-like character, we ask through our mediator, Jesus Christ, who died to reconcile us to you. Amen.