



# The New England Church Pulpit

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PASS THE SALT, PLEASE

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Matthew 5.13-16

*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.*

Salt. Sodium chloride. NaCl. A natural mineral necessary for human health. An element that enlivens the taste of food, intensifying and balancing the flavors. Salt preserves food, dehydrating fleshy tissue to speed up the drying process. It pickles and cures to keep food for lengths of time without refrigeration. It melts ice on the sidewalk and is essential in lowering the temperature of ice when making homemade ice cream. And what would a margarita be without salt? It softens the water in our homes and when added in sufficient quantity to a glass of water will allow an egg to float. In our modern world, it is the prime agent for introducing the necessary iodine into our bodies.

Nowadays Americans can buy Australian Murray River pink flake salt, “black lava” salt, Hawaiian red gold salt, and pure white sea salt which is extracted from Atlantic Ocean water off the coast of Wales. Maiden sea salt is a popular French salt that comes from the coast of Brittany in France; it is less salty than other salts and contains the faintest aroma of violets and crustaceans. A black salt from India contains sulfur and salt harvested in the Indian Ocean tastes very salty but with a bit of sweet, too. If variety is the spice of life, salt certainly delivers.

Morton’s Salt Company was the first to provide table salt that didn’t clump on rainy, damp days; hence the motto: when it rains, it pours, a double entendre that refers to the salt and the rain. Salt is one of the four flavors which human taste buds recognize.

Salt. Metaphorically it describes those who are grounded, dependable and practical: they are salt of the earth, reliable, good people. An “old salt” is a seasoned sailor who uses “salty language,” which would make those in polite society blush. In certain ancient cultures, salt was so valuable a commodity that it was kept in a beautiful container at the head of the dining table where the master sat. The more select guests sat nearer the host. Certain other people were described as being “below the salt” if they were perceived to be lowborn or socially inferior. There was no saying “pass the

salt, please” if you were at the other end of the table. In culture where salt was a measure of currency, to be worth your salt was to be worthy of your wages. And during the days of the Roman Empire, special salt rations given to soldiers were known as “solarium argentum,” the forerunner of the English word “salary.” Paradoxically, some things are to be taken with a grain a salt, i.e. insignificantly, without much concern. (The Phrase Finder. [www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk))

In myth, you can supposedly catch a bird by putting salt on its tail. Spiritual mediums tell us that a salt circle will keep ghosts and evil spirits away. Most magical circles can be made with salt to keep negativity from entering or leaving. Spilling a bowl of salt was a portent of evil and bad luck, so when someone spilled salt, they would throw a pinch of salt over their left shoulder to ward off any devils that may be lurking behind.

Salt has played a vital part in religious ritual in many cultures, symbolizing immutable, incorruptible purity. Covenants in both Old and New Testaments were often sealed with salt; it was the origin of the world “salvation,” says one source. In the Catholic Church, salt is or has been used in a variety of purifying rituals. In fact, until Vatican II, a small taste of salt was placed on a baby’s lip at his or her baptism as a seal of God’s love. There are more than thirty references to salt in the Bible, including this one in Matthew where Jesus calls his disciples “salt of the earth.” Shinto religion uses salt to purify an area, most notably before sumo wrestlers enter the ring for a match—which is actually an elaborate Shinto rite; a handful of salt is thrown into the center to drive off malevolent spirits. (Salts of the Earth.com)

So, when Jesus said to his listeners that they were the salt of the earth, there was a lot more to it than just a salt shaker to flavor your steak. In that ancient culture, salt would have held a significant place in ordinary life. It was a metaphor readily understood though unusually applied to people; you are the salt of the earth. The saying is set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus upends conventional wisdom. In a culture where only the strong, the healthy, the warriors, the well-to-do and the religious folk were accepted as God’s chosen among the chosen, Jesus turns things upside down by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God values hungering and thirsting after what is right and just; being peacemakers in a world filled with violence; embracing humility in a world of one-upmanship; and being merciful in a culture whose foundation was rigid rules and oppression.

Just as he used the metaphor of wine and bread for his own life of sacrifice and giving, so he calls his disciples—us—to be salt, to be agents that flavor the world with joy; that instill value in life; that give worth to those around you, particularly those whom society undervalues.

The other side of salt is its ability to sting an open wound. This was the effect on the religious folk of Jesus’s day; he lanced their prejudicial snobbery and rubbed the salt of justice into the open wound. This is the salt Martin Luther King, Jr. passed among the table of humanity when he dreamed that everyone would eat at the same table. Those who felt superior—whose prejudice was an open sore—felt the stinging reality of truth from this prophet of justice. Those who defended slavery and created laws that allowed them to legally maintain slaves felt the same intense sting when Frederick Douglas, even here in our own church in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, took his bold stand against the institution of slavery. It was salt that brought a new flavor to the world of the slave but a sting to the open wounds of the slaveholders.

“You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world” is not so much a compliment as it is a job description for people of faith, reminds Carlos Wilton. The church, and the individuals that comprise it, preserve and keep creation from apathetic tastelessness. When we forget that job, we have lost our saltiness and purpose, and deserve to be tossed on the road. Salty people preserve the dual role of the mineral we are to emulate: flavoring the world with love while exposing the sins of evil in a society.

(Carlos Wilton, Pointe Pleasant Presbyterian Church, NJ. “If Not By Our Light” in Lectionary Homiletics)

Being salt of the earth may take the shape of political action that upends the systems that oppress. Being salt of the earth may mean flavoring the culture with activity that preserves the essence of human dignity, offering food and shelter, acceptance and caring. Being salt of the earth may take the form of joy and laughter amid a world of fear and anxiety. Being salt of the earth may mean relaxing our schedules amid a culture that is frenetic with cell phones and texting and more activities than any one human can keep up with and stay sane.

Salt. Each year at the Seder meal, Jews reenact the Exodus out of Egypt, escaping the oppressive slavery of the Pharaoh. They do so by dipping bitter herbs into a bowl of salt water to remind them of the salty tears their ancestors had to endure before finding freedom in the Promised Land. Being salt of the earth may involve a few bitter tears, shed with and on behalf of, those who are suffering, and in so doing become a saving grace.

Do you remember the story of the seven-year-old boy who, when he came home one day, was asked by his mother where he’d been? He said he had gone to see the man next door, an elderly man whose wife of many years had recently passed away. “What did you say to him,” she asked inquisitively. “Oh, I didn’t say anything,” was his reply. “I just sat on his lap and helped him cry.” Salt of the earth sharing salty tears.

As we leave this place to be the Body of Christ, we go out as salt shakers to upend the world with unconditional love toward unrequited hearts, justice instead of prejudice, peacemakers rather than war mongers, lover and nurturers. We are, as it were, God’s salt shakers called to add flavor by accepting people as they are rather than requiring them to be who we think they should be. Each day new opportunities avail themselves of the need for truth and hope, of joy and compassion; as salt of the earth, we have potential for being worth our salt. Be the salt. Share the salt. Pass the salt. Please. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in whose love we move and have our being, we come today to discover a holy power for the present and a divine hope for the future. Refresh our faith so that the strains of life may not break our spirits; renew our courage that life's dangers and disappointments may not blind our souls. Empower us with an unshakable stamina that the tragedies of life, even death, may not destroy us.

The Winter Olympics, which began this week, remind us of the chance to do something good for the betterment of the world. May we be guided by this example of humanitarian cooperation where sport and healthy competition engender friendship rather than war. Inspire leaders across the world toward peaceful and equitable solutions that might bridge the political and religion divides, for the survival of the human race is dependent on our interdependence.

Be present today with those who are grieving and those who are in pain. Be to those who are homebound and those who are homeless a center of being. For those who continue to be affected by the economic recession ongoing hope that they will survive. Be close to those who fighting wars the world over and those who air forced to host wars on their own soul, and those shipped distances from home to fight wars they don't want to fight.

Open our eyes to your love that we may go from this place today having been nourished in your unconditional care and strengthened in our resolve to be agents of peace and comfort, joy and hope in the days that are to come. In the name of the Christ, amen.