

Saltiness

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Matthew 5: 1-13

Ok. Time for a quick poll: How many of you consider yourself saints? If I said, all saints raise your hand, how many hands are going up?

Hmm. Not too many.

Let's consider the definition of saint.

The Greek word for saint is hagios which means most holy thing. So saints are holy people. Our English word saint comes from the French santo, holy. When we look at the Hebrew words we get chaciyd which means faithful, kind, godly or gadowsh which means sacred, holy, or set apart.

So a saint is a sacred person, one set apart and holy. No wonder I didn't see too many hands.

The first images in our minds are probably what I call "classic" saints like Saint Peter who followed Jesus and went on preaching and teaching after his death. Saint Paul who wrote all the letters in our Bibles. Saint Francis who hung out with animals and the poor.

They all seem so beyond what is possible to do in a life. Even the handy saints like Saint Anthony who helps you find stuff and Saint Joseph who helps you sell your house if you bury him in your yard properly (if you Protestants think I am kidding, ask a Catholic friend), they seem to have super powers. What could we have to do with that.

Besides they are all dead. So, a saint is a dead, extraordinary, holy person, right?

Not right. I mean, yes, we do celebrate these extraordinary people of God. But that is not the limit of saints.

For saints do not need to be extraordinarily holy or dead. In fact, I am looking at a whole bunch of them right now.

Today we mark All Saints' Day, a time to remember the saints of our faith and to remember all those who have died over the previous year and beyond. All those whom we love and have lost. But it is also a time to reaffirm our own personal role as saints as well.

As Christians we believe in the communion of saints. A gathering of Christians is considered the communion of saints. That means, yes, those gone before but also those who are here right now, and those to come: moving forward and backward through time. We are part of this body, this communion, this gathering of people following God, serving Christ, filled with the spirit. We are saints.

When we gather, we are the communion of saints. Together we celebrate our past, affirm our present, and reach for our future. In fact, it is often when we do celebrate communion, when we take the bread and the cup, is when I feel most connected to that communion of saints stretching back and forward and in time.

In today's scripture Jesus says to the gathered crowd, he is speaking to the 5,000 at the Sermon on the Mount., "You are the salt of the earth."

"But if salt loses its saltiness, what good is it? It gets thrown out and trampled underfoot."

You know I have always heard this saying "salt losing its saltiness" as a metaphor. I didn't think that it was actually possible. How could salt not be salty? Isn't saltiness the essence of salt?

Well, it turns out that salt can lose its saltiness. It becomes an element called natron also known as impure salt. Natron has no salty flavor. It is bland, plain, like sand or dust. Natron was known in Jesus' day because some of the main sources for natron were in the Rift Valley in Egypt, a part of the Roman Empire at the time. Natron, impure salt, like regular salt, was good at preserving things. But instead of making salted fish or meat, the Egyptians used natron, this impure salt, salty-less salt, to preserve bodies. It was one of the main components of mummification or preserving kings as mummies.

So salt that has lost its saltiness is only useful to the dead. As Jesus says, it is thrown away and trampled underfoot.

And that does happen to us. We do lose our saltiness.

We sometimes are in deep need of salt. We sometimes lose our way. We lose sight of what it means to be Christians, what it means to be seeking the paths of peace and justice. Like athletes who use up all the minerals in their body, we need salt in the times when we lose sight of what it means to reach for what is possible instead of settling for what is. Salt that loses its saltiness.

And so Jesus exhorts the people, do not lose your salty flavor. Do not lose what makes you human, what connects you to the divine. We experience salt ourselves in our own bodies through tears of mourning, of grief, of thinking about those who have died. And in tears of celebration as we remember how they lived.

I would say it is exactly that, salt, that makes us saints. When we think salt of the earth, as Jesus calls us, we think, ok, we are talking about just regular Joes, regular Janes. The salt of the earth. But salt of the earth bringing seasoning, bringing what is needed, bringing an essential element to the world. Saints are the salt of the earth. By that I mean in part that they are regular folks like you and me, people who, out of their ordinary lives, do extraordinary things. I also mean that saints are the salt--the flavor of faith, of faithful living, of the essence of God--on this earth. Saints are those who remind us, when we have lost our own saltiness, of who we are and why we are.

As Christians we are called to be saints, salt shakers in a world that needs our salty push for change. Some churches celebrate a salt communion where instead of passing bread and cup, a dish of salt is passed and in taking the salt we remember those who suffer and pledge ourselves to walk with them. But you know, sometimes this seems improbable in my daily life if not impossible. Chris Clow, a Catholic chaplain reflect on this,

"I have to admit, it's been a little more difficult than I would have thought to know what to say for All Saints Day. The stereotypical Catholic thing would be to say that I love the saints, and, I mean, it's not like I don't. I do love the saints, and I think that as disciples, we are called to be saints. It's just that, after thinking that, it gets complicated. I always had the impression growing up that the saints were these great models of faith and morals, people who show us what it's like to be a disciple, people who really got it. And thinking about that now, today, honestly, it freaks me out. "These are people who founded huge orders and organizations, who

spread the faith to far off lands, performed miracles They did crazy, wonderful, huge things in the name of the Lord, and lived incredible lives. St. Francis Xavier dreamed of bringing the faith to China. I dream of occasionally having a day off. Even when I try to do awesomely good things, I (to paraphrase St. Paul) screw it up and do something wrong instead. Often times I can't conjure up enough faith to not be frustrated with my co-workers, or my students, or myself, much less move mountains around. What kind of saint can I hope to be?" Yeah, that sums up some of our struggles. But you know, many of these saints, if we dig deeper, had some serious flaws. Saint Paul, he could be a bit of a name calling jerk. Saint Peter did deny Jesus when it really mattered. And Saint Francis doubted on his deathbed that he had done anything of worth in his whole life. He died believing he was damned by God. You see, even the so called superhero saints had trouble. Just like us. The key to being a saint is to keep going in faith despite... despite ourselves, our flaws, our doubt, our screwups. It is in our salty persistence that we are marked as saints.

At the church my family attends in Plymouth, there is a member of the congregation who is, to put it mildly, a bit grumpy, hard to get to know and extremely opinionated. She is unhappy with change, impatient with new members and not particularly friendly to kids. Frankly, she intimidates me. I'll call her Fran.

And yet...

Plymouth has a problem with homelessness. I don't mean that the people who are homeless are a problem, I mean that the town refuses to deal with the fact that there are folks who can't afford Plymouth's exorbitant rents, the lack of affordable housing, and that homeless folks have nowhere to go. Creating a shelter in Plymouth is blocked by city leadership. So two churches, the one we attend and another, work together to provide emergency shelter for 16 weeks of the bad weather season. Homeless folks sleep on mattresses in the church social hall and get a hot dinner and breakfast. The reason I mention this (besides having a little space to rant about my hometown) is that there is one person in our church who coordinates most of this shelter project. And that person is...Fran.

One evening my family cooked dinner for the overnight guests and a couple of the men were having trouble getting health care for something or getting an application straightened out. And a volunteer sat down with each of them and helped figure it out. And that person was...Fran. She's also the one who reminds us cooks to make something soft to eat since a lot of the guys have trouble with their teeth, or no teeth at all. You get where I'm going with this. Saints are not perfect, lovely people. They have rough edges just like we do. They have fault, flaws, imperfections. Their one shared characteristic is, they are faithful. They stay salty. Salty with the words of Jesus seasoning their life. Fran is a difficult person to like. She is a difficult person to talk to in my experience. She can be tough for church leadership to work with. But sometimes I think that is because she doesn't have time for the fluff or niceties of life. There are homeless folks to care for and get situated. Folks that she knows by name. Folks that she offers her heart to. That is a saint.

We are called to be saints. Not the amazing flawless cleaned up versions of history. No. Real life saints. Ones with flaws and edges and faults. You and I. We are saints. Jesus asks us to be saints. Faithful. Bringing salt to a world desperately in need. And giving our money to that. And giving voices to that when we see injustice in the world or injustice in our workplace.

You are the salt of the earth, says Jesus. The men and women we honor today as Pilgrim saints and those others we loved and who died, all saints. And those of us here too. Living as salt of the earth, bringing about change--somedays inch by inch-- and working toward the kingdom of God.

Author Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "The saints are the sinners who keep on going." So how many of you are saints? Let me see those hands. Yes. The saints are the sinners who keep on going. So, my friends, let's keep on going.

Amen.

Edwina Gately--some would consider her a saint herself as she worked for decades with the poor and women stuck in prostitution in Chicago. She says that "Being a saint is all about being rooted in Christ and staying firm and faithful in the midst of all the chaos. "Being a saint in our times means being counter-cultural — seeing beyond and beneath the externals — knowing that, in spite of the fearful realities around us, the light of Christ is always present in the heart of our chaos. As the social activist William Coffin wrote: "Hopelessness adapts. Hope resists."

Saints have hope. As Clow continues: The saints were all wonderful, faulty, flawed people, just like we are, whose love of God and trust in their faith endured alongside their human failings. But that didn't stop them from trying. As complicated and as broken as some of the saints are, they still had faith which carried them through, and even with their brokenness allowed them to strive to serve God and others. That's a model I can follow after. We'll fail, sure. We'll fall short. But we can always get back up and keep trying. That is the ultimate mark of the saints we remember today. We can still be saints if we're broken. It might as well be a requirement.

As we move through this stewardship season we reflect on saltiness. How does our money and how we spend it, reflect our Christian faith? How does it serve Jesus' ministry in the world? How does our money reflect the hope we have?

What we offer to the life of this church connects us back to history and the legacy of working for the kingdom of God on this earth, of adding salt when needed. What we give connects us to the now, the myriad ways we seek to be the people of the promise, to share the blessings of our faith with those in this community and beyond. To be salt to the people of today.

When we gather in this church we come together as the faithful saints of this day and this time. We are the salt of the earth, shaking crystals of hope and love and fierce challenge into a world that ever threatens to slide into indifference. And as we pledge our resources to Pilgrim to renew this church for the year ahead, we promise to be salt to a world in need.

For Salt is essential. And you are the salt of the earth.

And so, on this All Saints Day remembrance, blessed be those who mourn for they shall be comforted. For all of us who are in depths of pain and loss over a death, illness, divorce, deep grief, we shall be comforted. We remember all the saints that have passed our way and are reminders whether still here or gone of what God calls us to be. Salt of the earth.

On this Consecration Sunday, remember again your call to be the salt of the earth, the flavor and seasoning, sometimes subtle, sometimes harsh, the spike of flavor of God's presence here, now. You are called to be a saint. For in being salt you season the world with the love of God and the promises of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit. And we shall together as the church, this Edgewood church, be the salt for this community and a world in need.

Amen.

In biblical times, however, despite some mixed symbolic usage in Hebrew Scripture, salt was overwhelmingly viewed as a positive resource. Not only does salt add flavor to food (cf. Matthew 5:17), it also preserves certain foods such as meat or fish from spoiling (essential

before the invention of refrigeration), helps to purify or cleanse meats through the removal of blood (forbidden to be consumed according to the Torah), and is useful in healing or cleansing certain ailments. All of these uses were commonly known in first century Palestine. Indeed, such uses were likely the cause for the symbolic use of salt in offerings and sacrifice, as well as in sealing God's covenant with Israel (Numbers 28:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5).

In short, when Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," he and his audience likely had much more in mind than a convenient flavor source. Salt was, to put it succinctly, a necessary element of life. And, by extension, salt was a symbolic bond of the necessary relationship between God and Israel.

There are three ways of categorizing saints. The most traditional and biblical is that all the followers of Jesus are saints or holy ones (see Greek below). We are not saints because we ourselves are so good. We are all sinners. But being blessed with the presence of God, the association makes us holy. We might even want to expand the New Testament and call all people saints since all, not just Christians, are children of God. Because we sinners are made holy by God's grace, and not by our own actions, we are able to keep on going as Stevenson says. Our keeping on in life often involves suffering. The Beatitudes in today's Gospel mention such sufferings like being poor, mourning, hungering and thirsting and being persecuted. This happens because the world often praises dead saints and persecutes living ones. Nevertheless, Jesus calls these suffering people happy even in this life (see Greek below). This is a paradox that can exist only in God's upside down world. Another category of saints is that of those special people from ages past who are placed on the calendar of saints and are held up for the world to emulate, people like Francis of Assisi or Lady Julian the city Anchorite of Norwich. But let us not forget that each and every one of us is called to be extraordinary even if history does not remember us. We can be extraordinary mothers, astonishing farmers, amazing nurses, outstanding grocery clerks, exceptional bankers, stupendous bakers, dazzling car dealers, or marvelous CPA's. Those on the calendar are not an exclusive group. They are simply the ones history remembers.