

Sermon for Sunday, February 9, 2014 Matthew 5:13-20 "You are the Spice Rack "

You are the salt of the earth.

Thanks, God. Nothing like setting the bar high, right? Couldn't I just be the salt on one plate of scrambled eggs?

No. We've got to be salt to flavor the whole world.

It's a little daunting, and add in the notion that we've got to do it NOW, not at some unspecified future time – Jesus says "you are the salt of the earth," not "you will be the salt of the earth once I've finished preparing you to do it" – and it becomes really scary.

Some days I don't feel particularly salty, though. What about it? What are my options?

And here's where I think about a couple of friends of mine from many years ago.

The first one was Terry. He's been dead for a good ten-fifteen years now, but I can still see him in my mind's eye as clear as day. Terry was brilliant – a specialist in the Soviet Union and China who worked on the sort of projects you're not supposed to know about. He was a prickly personality, and a very literal one. If he read the Bible passage about the Creation in Genesis and saw that there were two versions of creation, slightly different from each other, it would drive him nuts. And he would drive everyone else nuts around him asking questions so he could sort out how it was possible that the Scripture would have two conflicting versions of the Creation. He was like a dog with a bone – he wasn't going to let it go until he had gnawed that question into submission and gotten a plausible answer.

Now I wouldn't say that Terry was the salt of the earth. He was more like coarse-ground pepper, the kind that sometimes gets in your throat and makes you cough. You paid attention to Terry, because he would make sure you did until his questions were answered. If you didn't, the next thing you knew you'd be coughing on that little bit of pepper. But you also had gone through the exercise of looking at why there were two versions of Creation in Genesis – he had forced you to pay attention to something you mightn't have really focused on before, and you were enriched by the process. Sort of like a sprinkling of pepper on your eggs or your salad. Spiced it up a bit. Enlivened the experience.

Not everyone liked Terry, just like not everyone likes coarse-ground pepper. Some of us liked things bland and unchallenging, and Terry was neither. But after the meal, or after a conversation, you appreciated how much livelier it was.

Spice. It's a good thing.

And then there was Marie. Marie was like almond extract – golden, perfumey, scents of foreign places, a little exotic, all about the visuals and the décor and the clothes and the shoes (especially the shoes). Marie was not born a blonde, but by God, she was going to make sure she became one, at about the same time she bought blue contact lenses. She was also about the richness and generosity of true friendship, sharing ideas, sharing her stuff, saying what was on her mind.

As wonderful as Marie was, a little bit went a long way. Just like almond extract. Most recipes that include it call for a ¼ teaspoon or less, because it is intense. Marie, too – she was intense, and if you spent too much time with her, you wanted to go have some quiet time away from the golden shine, the opinions, the focus on the well-appointed wardrobe or home. But if you were in a jam, Marie would do whatever was necessary to

help you, without asking, without judging. Just doing it in a heartbeat because her loyalty was as intense as her haircolor. As intense as almond extract.

Spice. It's a good thing.

I wonder if Jesus was using a sort of shortcut when he was talking about salt in the gospel. Salt was certainly an important commodity not just for flavor but as a preservative, and it was an expensive one in those days. It was something that had to be acquired from elsewhere. It was difficult if not impossible to produce on one's own.

But that was true not only of salt, but of other spices as well. Pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, saffron: all of these were used in the Middle East when Jesus was alive. All of them were important and costly, used for flavoring and for preserving foods.

Maybe Jesus was talking about salt, because it was the most common flavoring agent, but his thoughts could be extended to all the spices, all the flavorings that made life both possible and enjoyable. But it's rather awkward to say "you are the salt and the pepper and the cinnamon and the saffron of the earth," so he just said "salt."

But imagine if what he was saying was "you are the spice rack of the earth!"

You are the salt, basic, so necessary to enhance the ingredients. You are the pepper, enlivening an otherwise bland meal. You are the cinnamon, warming up the innards when the cold takes away one's energy. You are the saffron, making golden that which was pale cream, adding a subtle perfume to something that was one-dimensional.

Think of the possibilities! And think about the fact that each of us may bring a different flavor, a different gift, to the table.

Think about the wonderful range of people sitting here today. What spice are you?

Gail, I'd bet you are the chili pepper, livening things up and getting all the kids out their our seats. Dottie, do you think you're the cocoa, making our hearts warm with your chocolatey goodness? Gray, you might be ground cumin, a strong but subtle presence in the mix. Anita, maybe you're the vanilla extract, which sounds so familiar and low-key until someone tries to bake something without it and discovers how important it is. Harrison ---- what spice are you? Nutmeg? A sprinkle of jazz on top of eggnog?

What if Jesus said "you are the spice rack of the earth?" Gets you thinking, doesn't it?

Taking the gifts that make you utterly unique, the different flavors, and using them to bring energy and joy and possibility – the joy of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – into a world that has lost its savor, a world that tastes bitter and flat and lacking in that special something that brings a satisfied sigh of "aahhhh."

What do you have to bring to that world? Is it comfort, like a cup of hot cocoa or a chai tea? Is it zip and energy, like a shot of ancho chili peppers in the stew? Is it mystery, like the hint of saffron in a rice pilaf? Is it joy, like a vanilla-perfumed birthday cake?

What flavor will you bring to the world as you live the Gospel? What word will you bring?

You are the spice rack of the world. Bring flavor and joy and a complexity that matches our diverse gifts, and bring the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.