

I don't know how many of you have younger brothers or sisters. How many of you have younger brothers or sisters? Can you raise your hands? Well, maybe you will relate to this memory I have of my own younger sister.

I remember one day when I was very little — I was maybe 5 and my sister was 2 or 3 years old. My little sister and I were watching TV in the living room, and my mother brought in a bowl of snacks for us to eat — pretzel sticks. Have you seen pretzel sticks? They're not twisted into little knot shapes—they're just straight, like tiny pencils. Well, anyway, when my mom brought in the snacks, I wasn't very hungry, so I just kept watching TV. Maybe 45 minutes later, I started to feel a little hungry so I reached over to the bowl, grabbed a pretzel stick and shoved it into my mouth. Uggggh—it was terrible. It wasn't salty at all. Very plain and a little soft. So I swallowed it and grabbed another one—but it was the same—not salty at all, like a pretzel's supposed to be. I was confused, so I looked over at my sister, and guess what I saw—she was licking the pretzel sticks. She was *licking all the salt off of them* with her tongue, then putting them *back in the bowl!* “Ah! No wonder these pretzel sticks taste so bad!” I thought. And then, of course you know what I did... “Mommy!!!”... It's a disgusting memory.

Did your little brothers or sisters ever do anything like that?

Salt has an interesting taste, doesn't it? I know lots of people who are picky about spices. Some people don't like ginger, some people don't like pepper, but *I've never met anyone who doesn't like the taste of salt.*

In today's Bible passage comes from a sermon of Jesus. In this sermon, he says that people who follow his way are “the salt of the earth.” What did he mean by this—“the salt of the earth”? Let's think for a minute about what that means.

Remember that in Jesus' age—2000 years ago, salt served a different function than it does today. Today, we use salt for seasoning, among other things—it makes food taste better. Of course, 2000 years ago, just like now, salt made things taste better.

But salt also had other functions. Remember that, back then, there were no refrigerators. So salt, in the ancient world, was used as a *preservative*. People understood that if you rubbed salt into a piece of meat, you could keep it longer, and you could keep it more safely. Salt was also used as a *medicine*—in fact, salt can be used to kill certain kinds of bacteria. Interestingly, by looking at old Hebrew documents describing daily life, scholars have learned that when babies were born in ancient Judea, they were often rubbed with salt, because people thought it would help purify them and keep them healthy. Salt was also used as a device for *protection*. Remember that in those days, people thought of the world as being divided into two

parts. They believed that there was a visible world—the world that we live in, and an invisible world—the world of spirits and demons, and angels and ghosts. Sometimes, these two worlds intersect, and when that happens, it's dangerous. So back then, people would sprinkle salt in the corners of their houses, or carry a little bit of salt in their pockets, thinking that it's mystical power would protect them from evil spirits coming in from the other world.

Salt was also something very valuable. Many cities were built around salt mines—Rome, for example. As a matter of fact, salt was sometimes used as money. The Latin word for salt, “sal” is the root for the English word, “salary.” In English, your “salary” is your “salt.”

So let's think for a moment about what Jesus meant in this passage. Jesus says, “You are the salt of the world.” But what does this mean? If you look in your bulletin, you'll notice that this short saying is the conclusion to a very famous passage of scripture—Matthew 5:1-12—this passage is printed in full in your bulletin today. Please read it later on if you haven't read it already. In this passage, which begins Jesus' famous “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus is explaining *a new way of being*.

In the society Jesus was born into, the vast majority of the people were poor, rural peasants. They lived very difficult lives. Recent scholars suggest that most of these farmers tilled very small plots of land, and had to live on only 1/3 of the crops they grew—the rest was taken in taxes and rent. They were politically disenfranchised. Their children had little hope of “upward mobility.” Most of Jesus' audience's national pride had been shattered when the Roman Empire took control of their land, and their own Jewish leaders appeared to have little interest in changing the status quo.

To these unhappy and powerless people, Jesus came and said, “Come, follow me.” If you read the first 12 verses of this chapter (printed in your bulletin), you'll notice that Jesus sets out 8 clues for finding happiness—(1) be humble, (2) find meaning in your sorrow, (3) maintain a gentle spirit, (4) hunger for justice, (5) show mercy, (6) keep your heart pure, (7) be a peacemaker, and (8) be willing to suffer for the cause of justice.

Jesus says that when people do these things, they'll discover that... *they're happy*. Why has Jesus' teaching continued to be popular for over 2000 years? Because it isn't difficult. You don't have to be a genius to be happy, according to these words of Jesus. You don't have to be rich. You don't have to be well-educated. Other people don't have to like or admire you. You just have to follow Jesus—to do what he did. Be humble. Discover the meaning of your sorrow. Have a gentle spirit. Hunger for justice. Show mercy. Keep your heart pure. Be a peacemaker. Be willing to suffer for what is right.

If we're like that, we'll be happy. *And we'll be special.* We will be *like salt in the world*, Jesus says. We'll make the rest of this bland and boring world *delicious—aromatic—palatable.* We'll make it *exciting.* We'll give it *zest.* We'll preserve it from rotting away. We'll cleanse it. We'll keep away the evil forces that would come in and destroy it.

Also, remember this interesting think about salt: Salt doesn't draw attention to itself. Salt's purpose is to draw attention to *what it's put on.* It enhances the flavor of *other things.* Salt make *other things* better. Salty people make everything and everybody around them around them more pleasant and more wholesome. They exist for the sake of others.

So maybe we should ask ourselves today, "How salty am I?" Jesus implies this question, right? If there are some people in the world who are like salt—people who stand out from among the crowd and make the world a better place by following Jesus' simple lifestyle, then there have to be some people in the world who are *not salty.* They *don't* stand out. They *don't* preserve or protect or enhance the world around them.

These people are not "salty," and they're not *happy.* Remember that Jesus advice in verses 1-12 lead to happiness. He says, "Happy are those who..." Happiness is a sort of barometer of our spiritual lives. If we're not happy, we're probably not doing many of the things Jesus suggests in this famous sermon. If we're not happy, then maybe we're not being humble. Or maybe we haven't discovered the meaning of our sorrow. Or maybe we aren't keeping a gentle spirit. Or maybe we're not really yearning for justice. Or maybe we're not forgiving people who have wronged us. Or maybe we haven't kept our hearts pure. Or maybe we haven't tried to be peacemakers. Or maybe we haven't had the courage to make sacrifices for what is right.

But Christians believe that when we do these things, we follow in Jesus' footsteps. When we follow in Jesus' footsteps, we become happy. And when we become happy, we become something special in the world. We become like salt. We become a beautiful seasoning in the world that makes everything taste so much better.

Let's pray,

God in this place,

Many of us lead very ordinary lives. Lives just like anybody else's.

There is a sense of safety in doing this, because we've always done it.

But we know You call us to something more.

You want us not just to live, but to live *fully, joyfully, meaningfully.*

**Sermon Title: Becoming Salt**

*Matthew 5:1-13*

You want us to live lives which stand out as different—lives which signal a new kind of humanity.

Help us, Oh God, to let go of our fear.

Help us get out of this trap so that we can become truly happy.

Give us joy in doing what is right, and make us the salt of the world,

In Jesus' Name, Amen.