

Once upon a time in a far away land, there lived a king who had three daughters. One day the king decided to test his daughters to see which one of them loved him the most. He asked his eldest daughter, "How much do you love me?" She replied, "Father dear, I love you as much as I love gold." Her answer pleased the king, for gold is beautiful and valuable. Then he asked his middle daughter, "How much do you love me?" She answered him, "Oh my father, I love you as much as I love diamonds." This pleased the king even more because diamonds are rare and extravagant. Finally, the king asked his youngest daughter, "And how much do you love me?" "My father," his youngest daughter answered, "I love you as much as I love salt." On hearing her answer, the king was offended and became angry. "You love me only much as something as small and ordinary as salt!" he complained. The king was so humiliated by his youngest daughter's answer that he banished her from the royal palace. The poor young woman wandered the towns and forests and fields of the kingdom alone, frightened, and very sad. She could not understand why her father didn't realize her deep love for him.

One day a merchant saw the young woman and asked her why she was wandering around the kingdom. She explained her situation and, as things only happen in fairy tales, they fell in love, got married, and the young woman went to live in the merchant's house. A year later, the king was out hunting and when the sun set, he got lost in the dark forest. In the distance he saw the light from a window and followed it to a house. He knocked on the door, announced himself and was promptly admitted and given the most comfortable chair by the fire.

The house the king had entered happened to belong to the merchant and the king's youngest daughter. When the young woman realized her father was in her house, she decided to prepare a very special meal just for him. The king sat down to a large meal of all kinds of foods but as he ate, he became disgusted. "What is wrong with this food?" the king demanded. "It has no flavor! How can you feed your king such terrible tasting food?"

Then the young woman appeared and said, "I made all this food for you, and you do not like the taste because I left out salt. Just like this food, your life would be terrible without salt. Now do you understand how much I love you?" The king recognized his daughter, apologized, for he had learned that for her, salt represented love itself, and promised never to doubt her love again.

What did Jesus mean when he said, “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another”? Did he mean, like the king in our story first thought: the common small grains of seasoning we put in our food to give it flavor? Did he mean the stuff already in our blood or in our tears that give them the taste of salt? Was he talking about the stuff in the ocean and seas? Or the stuff that is mined like rocks or gems from under the earth? When Jesus said the disciples were to have salt in them is he suggesting they go around scattering salt in front of them or behind them like the salt trucks on winter roads? This is Jesus we are talking about so, probably not and maybe yes.

In our Gospel today Jesus seems to be using salt as an image that represents something already a part of the world like salt is part of the sea and in the ground, and something that is already in our blood and tears. It gives life the same something like flavor gives to food.

The key to figuring out what Jesus is talking about can be found when we go back to the beginning of today’s Gospel where the disciples seem to want to stop the ministry of someone they didn’t know who was doing miracles in Jesus’ name. Perhaps this made them nervous or perhaps they felt threatened that more people might start following someone they thought was a pretender instead of following Jesus and them. Maybe they feared that person would become more important than them. But Jesus told them not to stop whoever was healing people in his name because that person wasn’t doing harm.

Then he gave his disciples a stern lecture that seems out of character for Jesus, as he used violent imagery like throwing someone into the sea with a millstone tied to their neck and cutting off body parts if they interfered with someone’s faith. He even mentioned hell. When the authors of the Gospels have Jesus talking in such salty language, it is a good reminder to us that Jesus was not necessarily passive and calm, like he is often portrayed in the movies. Jesus cared deeply, and if something his disciples said and did upset him, it seems he wasn’t afraid to show it. Just like whenever anyone uses strong language, it usually means they are talking about something important, and they are trying to get and keep our attention.

Jesus didn’t want to stop the person healing others in his name. But he seems to have wanted to stop his disciples’ elitist attitude and behavior. It seems to me Jesus didn’t have a problem with someone healing the sick, but he did have a problem with his disciples trying to stop that person because they weren’t in their group. Jesus’ lecture seems to indicate there is a problem, but it isn’t with someone else, it is with the disciples.

That's a good reminder for us because it can be too easy to look at someone else and start picking apart their appearance or behavior instead of looking at ourselves. To criticize others instead of examining what motivates us and asking ourselves if we really do care about the welfare of others or if we just want them to do what we want, even if it means someone could get sick or hurt.

That's where Jesus says the salt comes in. The salt is something that dispels selfish behavior like one-upmanship and elitism and instead promotes peace, both personal and communal peace. This salt is as strong as rock. This salt is as deep as the ocean and the sea. This salt is part of life and part of us all. Just like the fairy tale we heard; this salt is what Jesus came to embody: the love of God.

Like salt, God's love is strong and never ending; it is for all people. God's love is what offers healing and hope, welcome and mercy.

But, as Jesus warns, those who reject that love will create a hell on earth, one much more terrible than a king's flavorless meal, one that we doom ourselves to by hurting the earth and each other when we intentionally exclude each other, and fight and belittle each other. You see, when Jesus talked about hell in today's Gospel the word he used, in the original Greek, was Gehenna. This means Jesus wasn't talking about a concept developed by medieval theologians or scholars. Jesus was talking about an actual place. It was located just outside of Jerusalem. And it was a horrible place Jewish teachers used as metaphor for suffering in Jesus' day. Historians describe Gehenna as the place where all the garbage of the city was dumped. All the waste including human waste was burnt. There was supposedly so much of it that it seemed the trash fires were always smoldering. It was also the place where the dead bodies of criminals and enemy soldiers killed in battle were dumped. It must have looked and smelled awful. In our Gospel today, Jesus talked about hell as something people create, not God. People can create suffering; we create a hell on earth when we see each other as disposable, like how the king in the fairy tale threw out his youngest daughter when he didn't believe she loved him enough. We create a hell on earth when we use each other to gain status and prestige instead of loving each other the way God loves us. God does not throw anyone or anything away; God loves us and doesn't think of us as disposable. Those of us who follow Jesus are tasked to embody God's Love which can feel like a drink of cool water in a dry mouth or a flavorful meal. We are to work with God by loving God and each other to create God's Kingdom here on earth, a kingdom of relief and hope, strength, and peace. And all of us who follow Jesus are to spread this peace, this Love of God, around like so much salt. We are to embody God's love by giving peace, welcome, and hope not just to each other, but to everyone we meet. For the Love of God gives life to the world like salt gives flavor.

For example: The masks we have been giving away since the early days of the pandemic are a form of this salt, of God's Love. Not because we've given away over 1,100 face masks, but because we are starting to see other people wear them, especially inside area stores and restaurants and other places where masks are required. We are equipping people to get through this difficult and uncertain time and at the same time showing them we are in this with them. Our volunteers who keep the sharing cabinet stocked are being salt in the world by sharing what we can as safely as we can. Making the changes to our church yard is being salt by showing kindness to the earth, planting vegetation that is hardy and doesn't require mowing which is a kindness to our volunteers who mow the lawn and to the earth by using less gasoline. In sharing funds that had been sitting unused for years with children and children of color in our county for whom opportunities like sports and extracurricular activities are a struggle because of poverty is being salt. We are using those funds to give everyone equal access to opportunities, for those we help that can feel like a refreshing cup of cool water when they need it the most.

Perhaps following Jesus and having salt in us is not about status or prestige; it is not about being the biggest or the most important church in the city, it isn't about being wealthy and famous; it is about how we are present with our community and each other, how we embody God's Love. It's about how we notice the hells that are on earth, those places of suffering that it can be tempting to turn away from and ignore or deny. It's about offering an alternative to hell not by judging or humiliating or bullying people but by doing what we can to work with God to create the peace of God's kingdom on earth by how we live, what we say, what we do for others, even by what we sacrifice for the welfare of our community. It is the many ways we follow Jesus by loving God who loves us as much as salt and loving each other by having salt within us and being at peace.