



Photo taken in Ethiopia in 1985 by Sebastião Salgado

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost || September 29, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 21B || Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19 7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

We are in the last few days of September! I am so grateful that we have dodged some of the threatening weather that has afflicted our southern states. Reading the news reports of our Southern siblings, I am aware of how fortunate we have been this season.

I thought it might be delightful to spend a bit of our time this morning considering the incredible properties of Salt. Regular old salt – not the pink salmon salt that is forever trying to jump into shopping baskets at Marshalls or TJ Max – not the kosher salt that is sometimes required by recipes, or the stronger, flakier sea salt that can be overdone, except when mixed with caramel, which appears to be magic!

Jesus tells the disciples that they should have salt within themselves and to be at peace with one another. Which seems a curious mini commandment, and worth our investment of time. So today, as a first for me, I'm going to preach about the miraculous properties of salt.

If you are a baker, you are probably well aware of salt as a necessary ingredient for all sorts of things. I'm most familiar with the salt needed for chocolate chip cookies. Without the salt, the contrast between dough and chips is dull, and the cookies are not as good.

Without salt, a baked potato or even garden-fresh tomatoes don't taste their best. There is something about the chemical structure and make up of salt that can enhance all sorts of dishes. I'm told salt can remove the bitterness from a grapefruit or lime – I've not tried it, but am very curious about it, and am committed to trying it out at home this week.

Why might Jesus, who at this point in Mark's gospel, knows that his time with his disciples is limited – why would he tell his followers to have salt within themselves?

If you are a medically minded person, you might already know that Jesus was literally correct. That the human body is about .4% salt by weight. Our tears, sweat or perspiration is salty; and as serious workout fiends or runners know, we have to rehydrate in order to avoid dehydration or any of the ills that happen when our internal salt and water systems are out of balance.

Perhaps you have had to take care of a sick elder, or you yourself have had to work on the delicate balance of having the right hydration levels – not too much so that it strains your heart and circulatory system, and not too little so that you feel crummy or your brain becomes foggy. Our salt levels are vital to our overall health.

Salt, in moderation is miraculous. Salt in overabundance can be deadly.

Contrast our aspirations to be “the salt of the earth” with its positive and grounded connotations with the idea of “throwing salt in a wound” which is not a good thing, and not at all what Jesus is suggesting to his disciples. Throwing salt in a wound is to make it painful or to exacerbate a situation.

In truth, salt has incredible healing powers. When you were little or perhaps as parents, haven't we each recommended an ocean swim or beach wading to heal a child's skinned knee? Perhaps you have a parent like my mother, who always recommended gargling with warm salt water as the first line of attack against a sore throat, hurt tooth or bitten lip. And she was right! With repeated applications, my throat, lip or gum did feel better. I would wager a decent sum, that salt water sped up the healing process for skin abrasions.

But what has this to do with this morning's gospel and how might it inform our week? At the very beginning of this morning's gospel we have the apostles reporting to Jesus that they had witnessed someone – a random person - casting out demons in

Jesus' name. They didn't know this person, and in fact, we read that this healing man was not one of them. The disciples report that they had tried, but failed to intervene and stop the healer.

I envision the disciples, breathlessly telling Jesus of what they've seen and tried – perhaps Andrew and Peter, returning to Jesus' side and reporting on what they presume is a good deed-attempted – expecting a word of praise or thanks.

Instead of taking the disciples' side however, Jesus says that anyone who is ministering in his name will be doing good in the world. There is the famous and oft quoted summary in today's gospel - "Whoever is not **against** us is **for** us" which is complicated, has become corrupted, particularly when used with a political lens, and we'll leave unpacking this sentiment for another day.

What I think is marvelous, and is a gift to us, translates down through the ages for us to inherit is the absolute truth that anyone can do good in Jesus' name. Just as salt is a small, humble and common ingredient, it is also an incredibly necessary ingredient. Any one of us can be pressed into service, to make things better. To love and care for people in Jesus' name.

Yesterday, we were beautifully represented at Hanson Day by a contingent from St. Andrew's who added salt to a lovely town gathering. We met lots of folks, who may have come by our booth for the candy or stickers, but stuck around for the community or neighborly catch up and in the process, several shared some of the challenges that they are lugging around.

I was so honored and grateful to attend my first Hanson Day, and I am positive that Jesus was well pleased with breadth of conversations and the stories that were told and received in our tented space. I know that St. Andrew's attendance was not required for Hanson Day to be a success, but just like salt in chocolate chip cookies, our presence made the gathering better.

The St. Andrew's tent was situated between a fierce housecleaning company on one side of us and a holistic healer with scented oils and wellness accoutrements on the other. We were the salt, talking to folks about this parish, talking with visitors of every age about how welcoming and loving our community is.

Unlike all of our neighboring booths, we made sure that our visitors knew that they have a place to belong. A place where people offer ministry, presence, love, community and peace in God's name.

Jesus told his disciples, and is inviting each of us to be the salt of the earth. I look forward to hearing the ways in which you find yourselves living out this mini commandment. God is inviting each of us to be the necessary ingredient to make things better in God's name. The kind and healing presence that promises God's peace – which passes all of our understanding. Amen+