

“Fasting with Salt”

February 5, 2017



Half-way into the season of Epiphany, a season of ‘aha’ moments, with the light going on, and today’s passage from Matthew has Jesus call his friends salt for the earth, with the natural expectation that we’ll be enlightened on what that means here & now.



There are lots of ways we use salt today.

Foremost, physically - what we do with it;
as well, how it has crept into our language.

We use it to flavour our food or preserve it,
like salting down fish, or pork or even beef.
That would’ve been true for Jesus’ day also.

Today we use it to soften our water,
and for melting the ice on our roads.

I’m sure there are other uses too.

A negative use, one that goes way back,
was spreading salt on land (to poison it)
as punishment to a land owner who had
somehow ‘transgressed’ against society.

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In today’s idiom, the expression, “*salt of the earth,*” when used to refer to a person or a group of people, usually means those of great integrity and reliability.

There is the proverb: “*Take it with a grain of salt,*” to accept something with a “degree” of scepticism, just as food is more palatable with, “*a pinch of salt.*”

And the expression, “*Pouring salt on a wound:*” what you do, or say, to someone who is suffering that only serves to make it worse, hurt even more.

Then if you tell someone to, “*Go pound salt,*” it is a euphemistic abbreviation of a vulgarity, that essentially says, “*Go away! You bug me!*”

Sumo wrestlers toss salt over their shoulder, going around the ring to dispel the evil spirits.

But does any of that really shed any light on what Jesus was trying to communicate to his disciples, shepherds in training? So, let’s begin with prayer:

Mark’s Jesus speaks of his disciples’ saltiness,
Lk & Mt add the part about salt losing its savour.
Only Matthew has “*You are salt - for the earth.*”

Matthew’s Gospel addresses “Jewish” Xians.
What if it’s something only they would grasp?

In the Torah, the Hebrew books of the Law,
Lv 2:13 & Nb 18:19 mention the use of salt
in the cultic sacrificial rituals in the Temple.

And... that may well date back to its use as a symbolic purifier by nomads at covenantal rites or friendly meals.

And one directive, at thanksgiving for the harvest, in the festival of first-fruits when bringing the tithe to the priest, was to recite a Litany that began with

“My ancestor was a wandering Aramean”

Aha! Father Abraham was such a Nomad. Matthew’s Jewish listeners would get that.

Then I suppose we must ask ourselves,

“Is Jesus telling them what was a ritual is now embodied in them?”



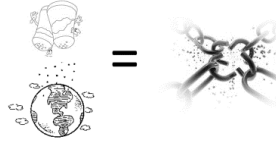
A salt that once symbolized God’s purifying, “Covenant” with Israel, has now become the people themselves:

“You are salt for the earth.”

Salt, not just for Jews, but for the whole earth.

Jesus wasn’t the first to have made that leap! The Isaiah school of prophecy, edited into one scroll in the 3rd cy BCE, counsels a similar “repentance,” re-thinking how we respond to God:

Today’s passage on fasting suggests Cultic ritual, on its own, does absolutely nothing to please God.



God wants not a symbolic, but an “embodied” fasting, the chains broken asunder.

“Is not this the fast that pleases me,” wrote Isaiah, as God’s mouth piece - God’s prophet - for Israel, to break unjust fetters, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free and tear off every yoke?

“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of Yahweh shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and Yahweh will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

“Yahweh will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.”

Mind you, I'm only suggesting this as a possibility.
Two thousand years later we cannot hope to know exactly what Jesus' intention was with this saying.
But I think it is consistent with the rest of his work.

And I do not need to iterate all the things we're already doing as "embodied saltshakers" in and from Kingston,
let alone the tens of thousands this congregation gave toward the wider work of the church in 2016.

But I would like to spend a few minutes talking about another sort of salt shaking for the Earth, one related to our "respect" for the environment.

It was the focus of an Academic Conference sponsored by Acadia University 10 yrs. ago at White Point, Nova Scotia, Oct 18-22, 2006.

There was another - more recent - event on "Climate Change" @Bear River NS, near Digby, April 24, 2010, and it featured one of the same presenters, the Dr. Leo Elshof.

(Elshof = Aldergrove)



The "Salt of the Earth" Conference proceedings are available at www.cjee.lakeheadu.ca/public/journals/22/salt_of_the_earth.pdf

Speaking of Dr. Elshof, from the School of Education, @Acadia U, his was the 1st of 7 papers presented @the 3½ day White Pt event, arguing for a more integrated approach among educators - environmental sustainability being an interdisciplinary vs a unique science

It is like appropriate use of the English Language is foundational to every aspect of education - life even, so is orientation toward environmental sustainability.

Last Monday I went to see the movie, "Arrival" a small group activity sponsored by Art & Soul. Significance of language in brain development in all human relations: with life, the planet, and a 4-D universe: H x W x D & Time was its theme.

Go see it. It's well worth the effort.

We must learn how to speak the language well; environmental fasting in isolation is lip-service - shaking salt instead of becoming salt shakers.

The second, by Paul Heintzman from the Department of Leisure Studies, @Univ of Ottawa, reflects upon the Environmental Phil of Bill Mason (Water-walker Movie)

Basically, Mason integrates traditional Christian Creation Theology with that of native Canadians:

"The Earth is God's good creation. We can learn from it. God is in relationship with it (and us as cocreators). Abusing creation is disobedient to God's directive to care for it. Walk humbly in it... not arrogantly over it.

“I think,” says Mason in the movie, “that the only hope for what is left of the world is to rediscover the love and compassion for it that the native people talk about. I think it to be possible - because God created us with the ability to do the impossible. When Jesus calls Peter to walk to him across the water, Peter was just fine until he remembered that people weren’t supposed to be able to do that; I think we have just forgotten how to walk on water.”

The third paper, by Lesley P. Curthroys at the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks & Tourism @Lakehead Univ, was about campfire stories on L Superior’s north shore.

Six locals & 3 researchers spent 2 hours ‘round a fire telling stories about connections to place, with the conclusion that, for all the participants such connections were integral to their identity.

“We are the earth,” as the song goes.

The fourth, by Catherine Conrad, Dept of Geography @St. Mary’s Univ., Halifax, was on Community Based environmental monitoring networks in the Maritimes.

It showed grassroots environmental stewardship as growing... when supported by academic researchers.

Local volunteers (well trained and equipped) monitor critical sites, i.e., watersheds, for environmental data. More empirical, less anecdotal, it’s gaining influence.

The 5th paper reported on the struggle organic farmers have marketing their produce. There are a few local co-ops during growing season... with a weekly distribution; but, organic berries @\$4.19/pt. (vs \$2.39) are a hard sell.

The 6th paper reported on a cooperative environmental education program between Japan & Nepal (NE of India).

The 7th researched academic institutions, reporting that a greener culture would be supported by most students

In the end, perhaps all those physical uses mentioned earlier, including how salt has crept into our language, are “implicit” manifestations of the significance of salt.

Without it our bodies would shut down quickly.
Too much is no less harmful - just takes longer.

That alone, makes it a good symbol
for the “sustenance” of life on Earth,
not just the salt... but how it is used,
how we are connected to the salting.

Salt is an integral reality of our every-day lives,
so it can be metaphor for well-integrated living.

Become isolated, compartmentalizing ourselves,
we lose our savour... bland, tasteless, ineffective.

Wading, loudly, into every issue is just as deadly,
just like Paul’s clanging gong, or clashing symbol,
or my hammering on an anvil, ears become closed;
shock & awe is - most often - more shock than awe.

“Fasting with salt” will involve as much “letting go of”
as “taking hold of,” perhaps even more; as we sprinkle
ourselves on the earth, let us do so gently... Amen.