

C – Proper 18

Luke 14:25-35

September 7, 2025

Salt

We live in a world where we are constantly warned to avoid too much salt. Of course, that is good advice. Too much of anything is... well... too much! But, with all of the warnings, we can forget that salt is good.

- It is essential for us and all animals to live.
- It allows our nerves and muscles to function.

And then there is food:

- If you ever forget to add the salt required for a recipe... you know it!
- Salt brings out good flavors and suppressing bitterness.

Now... what if your salt goes bad? Table salt can indeed go bad, and that can harm the flavor of things. But, if salt goes bad, it isn't because the salt itself has changed, but because of chemicals -- iodine, and anti-caking agents -- that have been added to it. So, pure salt, that vital ingredient to food and life itself, does not go bad. But the things that we add to it can.

This brings me to today's Gospel, because Jesus' teaching ends with a reference to salt and its losing its flavor.

The Gospel

To set the scene for this Gospel lesson... large crowds are now following Jesus. Why wouldn't they?

- He is popular!
- He is healing people!
- He is standing up to the authorities when they promote the law for simply the sake of the law!

In a world where – as the saying goes “there is no free lunch” – Jesus has even provided free food! This guy is all upside!

So, Jesus level-sets with the crowds using some hyperbole to make a very serious point.

- *“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”*

The crowds surely wonder, “*How can this be?*” In the first century, family defined you! One’s loyalty was always to family first. What is Jesus saying?

Then Jesus gets downright scary when he says:

- “*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*”

The cross is not something figurative in Jesus’ day – it is a cruel form of execution. No one in the Roman Empire wore a silver or gold around their neck. What is Jesus saying? To follow him will be to risk brutal execution.

Jesus gives examples of how one must weigh the cost of undertaking a building or a battle before starting. And then, he is shocking again with his statement:

- “*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*”

Most of Jesus’ followers would not have owned a lot, and yet they must give up what they do have?

Then Jesus concludes with his reference to salt:

- *“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

The teaching about salt might seem like a bit of a non sequitur after saying we must hate family, carry our cross, and sell everything. But... let's just say that it *'seasons'* what has come before and gives us a *'greater flavor'* for what Jesus is saying.

Living with this Gospel

Salt is always salt. Salt is good. But it is hard to separate it from what may cause it to become useless.

Hearing this Gospel lesson, see if you cannot recognize yourself in the salt.

- Salt is good.
- Salt is lifegiving. And...
- It matters what salt is mixed with.

Put another way, the wrong attachment to family; the wrong attachment to possessions; the wrong attachment to life itself can destroy our very selves.

Jesus' good news upends and transforms the ways of the world. It is not that Jesus' followers cannot love their families. But being a disciple will change how we see and love our families – and let's be clear – for the better. Like salt, as disciples, we better understand that our role is to enhance their lives, to help bring out their best flavor, and to minimize the bitterness. By putting Jesus' way of love first, we can come to love our families more fully.

To follow Jesus also changes our relationships with our very lives. We come to see that our lives are not our own. We did not create ourselves. We did not earn being here.

- It is all gift.
- It is all grace.

Grace is most fully lived when it is shared.

The same with possessions. Following Jesus changes our relationship to what we are blessed with. It isn't that Jesus' disciples had nothing, but what they had they used considering if it was consistent with their love of God and others.

In Jesus' teaching, he is asking us to be like salt – to be true to the image of God created within us – and not lose ourselves

- in family standing and rivalries,

- In how we may acquire possession rather than how possessions may serve our lives of love
- in never risking some good - even life as we know it – for a life truly deeper and fuller life.

In Jesus' teaching, he is asking us to be like salt - to not lose that amazing flavor God has created in each of us, and which is ours to uniquely offer.

Philemon

If we are struggling or wrestling with Jesus' teaching, a good way to get a grasp on it is to look at the situation of Philemon in our Epistle. By way of background:

- Philemon is a wealthy Christian, who has been converted by Paul.
- He owns slaves, and one, Onesimus, has presumably run away. We don't know why.
- Onesimus – whose name means “useful” – has found his way to Paul.
- He helps Paul while he is imprisoned.
- So, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter requesting his freedom and continued service.

In writing this letter, Paul is essentially challenging Philemon to live out the Gospel lesson we have heard. He is being asked to reconsider who is

family, what he owes his life to, and how he acts with what the law says he owns.

Paul asks Philemon to walk away from what the world considers normal.

- It is weird to give up a slave, but in so doing, he will gain a brother.
- It is a way that Onesimus can transform someone who was deemed a possession into a gift in furthering Jesus' good news with Paul.

Paul, brought Philemon to faith. Now it is as though Paul is asking Philemon to literally be “worth his salt” – to live into that goodness, that image of God, in which he has been created.

Now, I do love how Paul says: *“I am not going to even mention that you owe your whole life in Christ in me.”* – and of course – in doing so mentions it. But Paul really wants Philemon to act on his faith – to put his discipleship above what is socially acceptable and normal. Paul does not command Philemon to do this. Similarly, in the Gospel, Jesus doesn't command the crowds to keep following him. But in both passages, it is clear, while God's grace and love may be free to us, following where love leads will have its costs.

Walking in the Shoes of Philemon

One of the beautiful things about this letter is that we don't know what happens. We don't know if Philemon:

- Puts his discipleship first
- Embraces Onesimus as family and not a slave
- Releases his claim on Onesimus, and
- Frees Onesimus to help Paul in ministry.

It invites us to put ourselves into Philemon's shoes.

- How do we put our discipleship first?
- How does God's love in our lives and our discipleship change who we call family and how we treat them?
- How does it shape our treatment of others?
- What does it cost us?

If discipleship is costing me nothing, then I can't help but wonder:

- Am I really being a disciple?
- Am I really following Jesus' way over the world's ways?

If discipleship is costing me nothing, then I can't help but wonder if there are things I am holding on to so firmly, that I won't let God work on me and mold me. What should I let go of?

If discipleship costs me nothing, have I let my life become like that salt that is losing its flavor because of the extraneous things being added to it? Where, like Philemon, do I need to reorient my own vision to see others in a new way – as beloved sisters and brothers?

These questions are worth asking because, with love – with discipleship -- what we give away comes back to us. Following Jesus is like a good investment -- it yields back more so much more than it costs!

Closing

Wherever we find ourselves in our discipleship and lives, we are reminded today that we are like salt. Salt is good, and God gives us a tremendous power for good. Know that your goodness and worth, like salt, can never stop being good in the eyes of God's love. But, if you are feeling like your flavor is going a bit sour, then like Philemon, envision what changes you should make. We are all invited to reevaluate from time to time:

- what discipleship costs us, and
- whether we are allowing it to lead us toward our deepest selves and our deepest love of others in God.

Discipleship comes with a cost, but it also comes with the promise that it is worth all that we give it.

So go forth – be good salt! The world longs for all the goodness that is yours to give in following Jesus' Way of Love.