

“Please Pass the Salt” [Mark 9:50]

February 4, 2018

Rev. Ian K. Johnston St. John’s Presbyterian Church

Cornwall, ON

Developed from a guideline from PCC, Pres. Sharing and Stewardship

Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. [Mark 9:50]

Other Scripture References: Psalm 95: 6,7; Esther 7: 6,9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50; Zephaniah 2:9; Leviticus 2:13; Ezekiel 43:23; Exodus 30:35; Judges 9:45; Job 39:6; Psalm 107:34; Jeremiah 17:6; 2Kings 2:19-22; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5; Matthew 5:13

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible

The Gospel lesson this morning is a collection of Jesus’ sayings brought together by the writer. Some have pointed out that these sayings are loosely related. The context is that of a disagreement between the disciples (9:33-37). Who is the greatest? And with others, another exorcist? (9:38-41). After this, Jesus teaches them about the meaning of discipleship, which is service of all, especially the weakest. This discussion is continued in vv. 38-50.

A disciple is described as one who offers hospitality, does not offend those new in the faith and lives according to a rigorous self-discipline. Those who have lost this distinctiveness are like flavourless salt – they are no longer useful. Those who follow these teachings will live in peace with one another. They will no longer ask *Who is the greatest?* Or, *Why can we not stop someone who is not following us?*

Salt has many uses: to make things clean

to keep things from going bad

to make food taste good

Salt has a special ability to permeate and to penetrate. Jesus was talking to people who knew something about salt. In Biblical times, salt was a necessity of life and was obtained from the Dead Sea. Zephaniah 2:9, refers to the salt pits of Sodom and Gomorrah. Salt was used as a condiment and preservative. It also was part of the sacrificial rituals of the Temple. Salt was used with cereal offering (Lev 2:13), burnt offerings (Ezek. 43:23) and incense (Ex 30:35).

The term, “salt” was sometimes used as an image for barrenness and desolation (Judges 9:45, Job 39:6, Psalm 107:34; Jer 17:6). However, the life-giving and preservative qualities of salt are also mentioned (2 Kings 2: 19-22). The expression, a *covenant of salt* (Num 18:19, 2 Chr. 13:5) means a permanent covenant since eating salt with someone means to be bound in loyalty with the other person.

In the New Testament, these positive qualities of salt are mention. Jesus refers to his disciples as *salt of the earth* (Matt 5:13) indicating the mutual loyalty of the covenant relationship and the quality of discipleship.

Here in Canada there are three major salt formations. in Western Canada, Ontario and the Atlantic Provinces. I have visited the salt mines at Goderich and Sandwich, Ontario. These deposits occurred in various geological eras and all of them are the remains of ancient inland seas. The shorelines of these ancient seas which outline the edges of the salt beds mark the occurrences of oil, gas and coal deposits.

We now know that salt is important for our personal health as every living cell in our bodies is bathed in a salt solution. Salt occurs naturally in some foods. The flavour of other foods is enhanced with a sprinkle of salt.

In the Gospel lesson, many of the people to whom Jesus was speaking, were fishermen. For them, salt was indispensable, used daily, a necessity of their trade as a preservative. When salt loses its saltiness it may still look like salt, but it no longer does the work of salt. It becomes of little or no use.

It seems that this passage is a mandate for the Christian church to be a distinctive community. This has far reaching implications for both individuals and the congregation. We are to be *salty*, making a difference in the world, living together in a particular way. We are to be hospitable, living and working together in a manner that is peaceable and that does not cause another to stumble. We are to show the love of Christ in the way that we live our lives together.

Does this mean, that in order to make a difference, we must be *pure salt*, not mixed with other things; motives, sin, and weakness? No! Look at the ingredients listed on the side of a box of salt. There you will find the first ingredient is salt, sodium chloride. But you will also find calcium silicate, potassium iodide, sodium thiosulphate. This combination of ingredients still does the work of salt. However, if you poured out half the box of salt and then filled it up with some white sand, it would not do the work of salt, or at least, not nearly as well. We do not need to be perfect but we do need to keep the good news of Jesus Christ as the key ingredient, the central part of our lives.

When disciples or congregations lose their saltiness, lose the good news of the kingdom from their life and witness, they are then of little use. What does it mean to lose one's saltiness? For the church universal, for the denomination, for the congregation, for an individual? It could include a number of things such as: not speaking out against injustice, condoning inappropriate behaviour, unquestioningly embracing cultural or economic values, being focused more on oneself and one's survival and neglecting to reach out to others. If you ponder this for a moment, can you think of something in the current global situation that could cause people of our congregation or denomination to lose its saltiness? Can you then think of something in the local context? Think of something that could affect Cornwall. Think of something that could affect the St. John's family. In each case, what could you do, or can you do to help gain or regain the saltiness?

Saltiness in an individual or the congregation or in our denomination is seen by the difference they make in the world, adding flavour, changing lives, even bringing about transformation. This saltiness penetrates beyond them as they share and partner with others.

Today we celebrate *Presbyterians Sharing* and congregation Stewardship. Today we thank God for our life together as members of the St. John's congregation and our togetherness as members of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We thank God for the opportunity to be a distinctive presence in our community, our country, and our world, making a difference in the name of Jesus Christ.

Presbyterians Sharing, is the name of the budget that funds the work of our national church. But it is more than just a budget. The congregation stewardship plan for the current year is far more than just a budget. *Presbyterians Sharing* and our Stewardship in support of our local congregation makes many things possible. Locally, we support the day to day ministry and mission within this community and within this Presbytery and Synod.

It helps us focus on a realistic ministry and mission that are attainable within the calendar year such as Christian Education including programmes for our youth and this past year, the summer Vacation Bible School. The Worship and Music Ministry is supported in having a wonderful organist and music leaders, maintaining our musical instruments and the purchase of music; we have contemporary music which many of you enjoy from time to time; and there is the stipend and emoluments for having a pastor in residence. The Mission and Outreach has a difficult set of choices to make each year within the achievable budget resources, such as, gifts to the hospice centre, the various homes for runaway or abused children, abused women, the pregnancy centre, the soup kitchen, just to name a few. Under the direction of one of the committees is the dispersement of funds to enable worthy recipients to receive education gifts.

The Board of Managers and the Trustees must maintain our facilities within both our comfort needs and also the various by-laws of the City of Cornwall and the Province. We have several licences to maintain each year. We have support staff to keep our building presentable and to prepare for each worship service. The main office, although staffed chiefly by part time staff and also with volunteer helpers from time to time, there are computers, copy machines, and of course – paper! Our home is subject to all the challenges you have in your home with the rise in energy costs, hydro, gas, insurance, garbage pickup, painting, grass cutting and snow plowing.

Within *Presbyterians Sharing*, the gifts aid the work of our national church. [You may know that the PCC is the second oldest federal charter in Canada, second only to the Hudson Bay]. Again, it is much more than just a budget because it makes many things possible:

- **makes possible our existence as a denomination in Canada, the General Assembly, it's offices and the various courts of the church**
- **helps to train ministers**
- **provides support for congregations through resources and workshops, especially in areas of CE, evangelism, worship, stewardship, mission awareness and justice work**
- **builds new churches, an important element for building a strong future church**
- **provides support for professional church workers and assistance to congregations in settling vacancies**
- **helps us to work ecumenically with other church organizations**
- **supports mission in Canada through native, inner city, urban, remote and chaplaincy ministries**
- **supports mission overseas with about 40 mission personnel working with international partners around the globe**

All of these make a difference, here in Cornwall, and all around the world. They help us to have a 'salty' presence right here and in communities across Canada and in many places of the greater global village.

Salt is a very common substance. It is somewhat rather ordinary, not too exciting. When our congregation's treasurer pays a bill for heat or hydro that may not seem to be the most exciting thing. It may seem to have nothing to do with what the congregation is about. However, given our Canadian climate, heat and hydro are important. To have a warm, well lit church facility that is inviting and enables ministry and outreach to happen, is important. Many of you do not see the boys and girls and their leaders that are here nearly every Monday evening. Unless you are here through out the week, you will not see

the young people and adults who use our facilities. Unless you are on the BofM you will never see the newest directive from the elevator inspector or the discussion for the changes in the fire alarm system etc. Unless you are a participant in the BofM or the Worship & Music you might never have to consider the cost of our music licence that must be paid annually so that we may legally use copyrighted music in our worship. But all these things are important. The quiet behind the scenes work of the people in the offices may not seem as vital as the work of the front-line mission people. Yet both are important to enable ministry to happen.

Through your gifts to and through St. John's, and the gifts that are forwarded to Presbyterians Sharing, the Church is able to do far more than any one individual, group, or club. Through your contributions you are sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Every part of it is important, and every part of it, although some of it behind the scenes, is front line ministry. Together we share the commitment through financial gifts and with prayer. Together we share God's love and God's gifts with the world and the community God gave us.

We are the salt of the earth. Let us have salt in ourselves. Spread God's love around. Please pass the salt! Amen.