Sunday, February 7, 1993
PLEASE PASS THE SALT
Matthew 5:13-16

Last week, I bought a box of table salt. It weighed one pound, ten ounces, and the cost was 29 cents, or about 18 cents a pound. We hadn't purchased this kind of salt for filling salt shakers and cooking for several years. From time to time, we do buy the kind of salt that is used in our water softener, and last summer, we purchased a small bag of coarse salt, the kind used in making homemade ice cream. Incidentally, on the same shelf in the grocery store where I found the table salt, there was a wide variety of salt substitutes, all of which were much more expensive than common table salt.

Like most people today, we don't use much salt, if any, in what we cook, and we seldom add salt to the food on our plates. Therefore, the phrase, "please pass the salt," is seldom heard in our home anymore, and the same is probably true for most of you. We even read the labels on the prepared or canned food we buy to determine what the salt content is. That's because salt has gotten a bad reputation in our time. We are frequently told by people in health care to watch our salt intake. Too much salt is bad for your health, especially if you have a tendency toward high blood pressure. Still, most tables in restaurants and homes have salt and pepper shakers on them.

Salt, for most of us, is inexpensive and common, and we take it for granted. Thus, when we hear Jesus telling his disciples and us that they and we are the "salt of the earth," we are not much impressed, nor do we feel especially complimented.

We are a little more moved when Jesus said, "You are the light of the world," although even light, for most of us, is taken for granted. We walk into a room, flip the switch, and the light comes on.

In Jesus' time, however, both salt and light were considered valuable and necessary for life. The preservative powers of salt, especially for preserving food, made it an absolute necessity of life and a virtual synonym for essential life-giving forces, and, not surprisingly, endowed it with religious significance. In Israelite worship, salt was used to season incense, and all offerings had to be seasoned with salt. The Old Testament prophets used salt as a symbol of the eternal covenant God made with the Hebrew people.

Today, we have other methods of preserving food — canning, refrigeration, and freezing — so salt does not have the same value.

By contrast, in the first century and before and after, salt was so valuable it was sometimes used to pay wages. In fact, our word "salary" is derived from the word "salt." Salt was used as a medium of exchange. People treasured salt as we might value gold or silver.

One of the least remembered uses of salt from the time of Jesus, and for centuries thereafter, was as a fertilizer. While we think of excessive salt in soil as one of the negative by-products of modern agriculture, the opposite was the case for early farmers. Salt was often scattered and worked into the soil to enhance the productivity of the land. Indeed, as recently as World War II, British farmers compensated for the lack of nitrate fertilizers by once again returning to the ancient tradition of adding salt to croplands for increased fertility. In the ancient world, and even not so long ago, salt was used as a disinfectant, thus the phrase "salt in the wounds."

So in the first place, when Jesus said to his followers, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was paying them a tremendous compliment. He was saying, “You are something of high value and importance as a creature of God, and you are much needed in the world.” It’s a good metaphor even today for us as individual Christians and for congregations.

Here’s a second application of the metaphor. Salt is that compound which adds flavor or zest to food. We have all tasted food without salt, and we know how flat it is. Just a pinch of salt in many foods brings out the flavor which is hidden and which would remain hidden had not the salt been added. It changes the nature of the food itself as it reacts with it. And if the food is correctly salted, we do not taste the salt itself as a separate entity, yet the flavor of the food is different.

Isn’t that what we Christians, individually and as congregations, are to be to the world in which we live? We are to add flavor, spirit, and joy to life. The world in which we live is to be changed for the better because we are in it. We are the salt of the earth.

History shows that we have been the salt of the earth in many ways. Much of the great art in this world is religious art. Some of the most moving music has come through the inspiration of the Christian faith.

There’s a warning here as well. Salt can lose its integrity, its identifying quality as salt. This does not usually occur suddenly but so gradually that those to whom it happens do not perceive themselves as changing and cannot identify later a single time or place when their faith ceased. It died slowly over a period of time. How often in my ministry have I counseled with people who have told me that their lives have become flat and empty, like food without salt.

A human relationship between two people can lose its saltiness. A marriage can become dull and flat, with no flavor, no joy. Christian congregations can lose their saltiness and no longer have any zest or spirit as the body of Christ. They simply go through the motions, but there’s little, if any, joy, energy, or zip.

Another warning: if too much salt is used, it can cause damage. In the past and in the present, sometimes Christians try to be too much the salt of the earth. They want to be in control of everything. Whenever that has happened in the past, those societies often became the least merciful, the most dogmatic, the most unforgiving, and had almost no freedom. Heretics were burned at the stake.

“You are the salt of the earth.” It’s a good metaphor. A third application is that in addition to being of high value and adding flavor, joy, and zest to life, salt is also a preservative. Just the right amount of salt kept the food from spoiling, from decaying, and from becoming rotten.

Now apply this to us as individual Christians and as congregations in the world. Societies, communities, cities, and towns can also become corrupt, decay, and spoil. Communities can forget the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden. Just as there are forces at work in the world which spoil food unless it is properly treated for preservation, there are also those forces in the world which spoil, corrupt, and tear down the lives of individuals and societies as a whole.

None of us are immune. St. Paul, many years ago, wrote of the pull of temptation in his own life: “My own behavior baffles me. For I find myself not doing what I really want to do, but doing

what I know I shouldn't do, what I really loathe." We know what St. Paul is talking about. That has been our experience too.

After the Los Angeles riots, a reporter from one of the radio networks was interviewing one of the riot's many looters. The man had been one of many people who had looted a record store. When asked what he had stolen, he said, "Gospel tapes. I love Jesus." Life is a constant battle between the temptation to do what is wrong and what is right. There is always a need for the salt of the earth. Sometimes the decay, the spoilage within us and within society, can work so slowly and subtly, gradually eating away, like termites behind the wall or like the decay of a tooth that's hidden from view.

Followers of Jesus who are the salt of the earth are always needed. Sometimes in our more established communities, we take for granted how essential Christians and the church are to the health and integrity of our towns and cities and society as a whole. Again, it's like salt in food. We don't miss it until it's not there.

Before coming to this church twenty-one years ago, I was working in our national church office and had the job of helping to start new churches in many of the new communities in this country. I especially remember what one woman, the mother of two children, said to me about how she and her family discovered the importance of the church in their new community.

She said, "We tried everything we could think of to make this place something other than a real estate development. We tried organized recreation, little leagues, community picnics, neighborhood improvement associations, bridge parties, and garden clubs. We tried everything, but it was not until the church came and became strong and active that we changed from a real estate development into a community."

The people of vision who organized this congregation almost 127 years ago, when Lincoln was still called Lancaster and had only four homes, knew how crucial it was to have vital and alive churches in a community.

On the other hand, studies show that when churches have deserted the inner city or the neighborhoods, the decay and collapse of the entire area come much quicker, and where churches have stayed and served the area, the community has been strengthened and vital. Therefore, as you know, I am never apologetic, and you never need to be apologetic when you ask for the financial support of churches like this one. When the churches of a community are alive and well, then you have a healthy community.

"You are the salt of the earth." The first educational institutions, long before the existence of public schools, were started by churches. The first hospitals, the first nursing homes, the first orphanages, the first homes for the mentally ill and retarded were all started by Christian churches.

If you want to see "salt" at work every day of the week, visit our preschool on a weekday, our Sunday Church School on a Sunday morning, our worship services, an Abendmusik concert, one of the youth groups, one of the coffee and conversation groups for mothers, the Boy Scout program, or any one of a number of the other groups that find their home in this church building. Or visit the home of a shut-in who depends on the telecast of our worship services.

A few weeks ago, I was in a hardware store here in Lincoln, dressed in my work clothes for doing some work around the house, and a woman I had never met before walked up and said

to me, “You saved my life.” Surprised, since I didn’t know who she was, I asked her to explain, and she said, “My husband and I depend on the worship service from your church that we see on television each Sunday morning. It’s our lifeline. My husband is homebound, and I can only be away from him for a short length of time. It is not possible for us to go out of our home to attend a church worship service. Your church service on television has been our lifesaver.” I could multiply this account by the hundreds of people I meet on the streets and from the mail we get because of our television program. For me, and I hope for you, the words of Jesus, “You are the salt of the earth,” form an appropriate metaphor for the work of this church and for us as individual Christians.

Remember, to be effective, salt has to be put into food or into a wound, not only set alongside it or kept in the box.

If we Christians are to continue to be the salt of the earth, we have to be in society, in the world; we have to reach out as we are doing with our television ministry, our preschool, the Boy Scouts, our youth groups, and our many other outreach programs. We have to practice our faith among people, in our homes, and where we live and work.

Or, as the second metaphor which Jesus used for his followers puts it — we have to let our light shine, not put it under a cover where no one can see it and where it does no good for anyone, not even ourselves.

I hope that as a church community and as individual Christians, we never lose our saltiness. Unfortunately, to be a church member and a Christian in our times seems to many to be irrelevant and kind of dull. To be good, to have integrity, to be honorable, and not to cheat is to be laughed at by some among us. Cleverness is valued more highly than honesty. Evil is portrayed as being spicy and exciting.

A magazine cartoon I saw showed a publisher ushering an author out of his office and saying regretfully, “Your novel is excellent, but right now we’re looking for trash.”

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” What a compliment! What an opportunity! Amen.