

**Sermon for Proper 21(B)  
Year B**

**(RCL) Esther 7:1-6,9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50**

**Careful Seasoning**

Lest you think you've inadvertently stumbled onto yet another cable television cooking show, remember that Jesus himself brought it up: salt.

Salt is essential to human life. The National Academies of Science recommend that each of us, on average, take in about 2400 milligrams of sodium daily. That's about eight-hundredths of an ounce, or roughly a teaspoonful.

If you eat a whole lot *less* than that, your cellular electrolytes may become unbalanced, resulting in an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular disease. Yes, that's right—for most people, *low* sodium intake is dangerous.

And if you consume a lot *more* than the average, you can take on extra weight or become at risk for high blood pressure. Excess sodium can also be toxic. So, *high* sodium intake is also dangerous.

So—salt is essential to human life, but having either too little or too much is fraught with risk to our health, safety, and even survival. Hey, maybe this *is* about cooking, after all: too much salt, and the dish is ruined; too little salt, and the dish is tasteless.

Jesus' metaphoric use of salt deserves some deconstructive analysis. It's a complex metaphor. You've heard the old expression, "He's the salt of the earth," right? That indicates that someone is dependable, decent, and trustworthy. Jesus uses that very expression in the Sermon on the Mount—"You are the salt of the earth."

Yet salting the earth is a destructive thing. This was the "scorched earth" tactic of warfare before Agent Orange was devised. According to the Book of Judges (9:45), [Abimelech](#) sowed his own capital of [Shechem](#) with salt after quelling a revolt. He killed all the people, razed all the buildings, and then salted all the fields—assuring that no one would forget who was the boss.

Salt, you see, is itself neither good nor evil—but it can be *used* for good or for evil, to sustain life or to prevent it, to regulate the body's electrolytes or to induce a stroke.

You can take something with a grain of salt, thereby making it more palatable; or you can rub salt into a wound, thereby increasing the pain.

Add to this that in the Roman Army, salt was a regular part of a soldier's compensation. If a soldier was "worth his salt," if he had performed well, he'd be paid accordingly. And, before refrigeration and freeze-drying and chemical stabilizers, salt was the best preservative known to humankind.

Salt is so powerful a symbol that Mahatma Ghandi was able to use it to topple the British colonial rule of India. In 1930, the British levied a tax on salt, as they had a monopoly on the salt trade. Ghandi decided to walk some 240 miles to the sea coast, a journey lasting 23 days. And the procession

following him grew until it was 200 miles long. Upon reaching the ocean, Gandhi raised a lump of mud and salt and declared, “With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire.” He then boiled it in seawater to make the commodity which no Indian could legally produce—salt. Historians consider this event a turning point in the movement for the independence of India, something that was not finally achieved until 1947.

Something remarkably similar happened with tea in Boston harbor, you may remember—a turning point in the movement for American independence.

The British in 1930, it seems, had very little appreciation for their own history, and thus were destined to repeat it. And, they did not understand the importance of salt.

Jesus, of course, does not underestimate the power of figures of speech, or images, or allegories. And so his discourse on salt is just jam packed with meaning, and nuance, and symbolic value.

And, although many paths present themselves, there’s just one particular direction for us to go with this sodium-soaked sermon: a discussion of religion in contemporary society.

We are all familiar with over-salted religious organizations and sects—radical fundamentalists, extremist ideologues, that sort of thing. You can almost feel the severely high blood pressure in the veins of most television evangelists, can’t you? This kind of religion clearly suffers from a surplus of salt, for when their bodies naturally try to expel the excess, they try to rub the salt in other people’s wounds. As if to punish people for being wounded.

This kind of religion is very dangerous—and it is always focused on demeaning and degrading others, because they are not living up to some fictive standard of behavior. I call their standards fictive, because they are always based on human interpretation, not true divine inspiration. Women must obey their husbands, men should not sleep with men, men must not marry the daughter of a foreign God—all these are abominations in the sight of God; that’s what our holy Scripture tells us.

And these folks, who are condemning these few things as Holy Writ, go off and eat their shellfish, or shed innocent blood, or sow discord in a family, or tell lies, or dig into that delicious pork tenderloin (or any meat that was killed more than three days ago)—and, you know what? All these are abominations, too.

This is the danger of over-salting religion. While we see more and more of it around us, fortunately we Anglicans are more delicate in our seasoning. We’re too careful in the crafting of our language, too shy for emotive outbursts, too reticent in our outward expression. And don’t get this wrong: these are all good things! We rarely suffer from too much salt.

But we more often risk the *other* danger—too *little* salt in our religion.

For this, there is inspiration not from the Holy Spirit, at least not directly, but from J. Edwin Bacon, Jr., the Rector of All Saints Church in Pasadena, California.

In a sermon, Father Bacon expresses concern that the preaching from pulpits in this country has become too neutral—less salty, if you will. And, as a result, religion becomes more and more of a

problem. “Jesus proclaimed that religion too frequently is not a part of the solution. Too often is not only a part of the problem. It *is* the problem.” Like salt that has lost its flavor.

The Revelation to St. John (chapter 3)—quoting Father Bacon again—“speaks of the Church . . . that had become so bland, so ineffectual, so callous to human suffering, so cowering before the saber-rattling of the empire of the day, so lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, that God said, ‘I will spew you out of my mouth.’ That is exactly what happens to churches and other faith communities that do not stand up, speak up, and act up when human beings are not treated with the dignity and honor due those who bear the image of God.”

It’s easy to see the over-salted religious zealots and say, “That’s not us!” But what of the diet of bland spirituality served at so many altars?

Salt is essential to human life, but having either too little or too much is fraught with risk to our health, safety, and even survival.

Finding the balance is a life-long journey. It includes taking risks, being willing to allow failure, making mistakes, and trying new things. And it includes turning around, going back to what works, avoiding hazards, and steering clear of danger.

It’s a never-ending, constantly changing, and life-consuming crusade. And the only way any of us has even a glimmer of a chance of success is because God’s wills it so.

Here, among the faithful, we find the strength to persevere. Here, among the faithful, we heed the warnings to avoid pitfalls we might otherwise suffer. And, here, among the faithful, we find the motivation to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

So, here we are, friends:

- A place where we have never put too much salt on our liturgy.
- A place where you do not need to check your conscience at the door.
- A place where our worship can serve to transform the people of God, empowering us to daring action on behalf of the oppressed.
- A place where every part of you is welcome, and every hurt can be healed.
- A place where salt is used liberally—but not to excess.

It is here, in the carefully seasoned assembly of the faithful, that we will find the strength, the wisdom, and the inspiration to use the gifts God has given us to transform ourselves and the world around us for good. Amen.

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