



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 5 (A)

Talking to the Salt

[RCL] Isaiah 50:1-9a, (9b-12); Psalm 112:1-9, (10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20

The celebrated Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote many odes. An ode, you will recall, is a poem that addresses its subject in an exalted fashion. Thus, we have poems by Keats such as “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in which an enchanting bird and an ancient ceramic vessel are directly addressed. Pablo Neruda follows the same pattern in “Ode to My Socks” and “Ode to Salt.”

In his “Ode to Salt,” Neruda says a great deal before reaching his conclusion, where, speaking still to salt, he declares: “The smallest, the tiniest wave of the shaker brings home to us not only your domestic whiteness but inward flavor of the infinite.”

So, the smallest grain of salt, one invisible to the eye, brings to us the flavor of the infinite, the inward flavor. Thus, the poet offers high praise to ordinary salt. Strange though it seems, he speaks to the salt directly, with a voice of respect, about how well it serves to bring about an epiphany, the inward flavor of the infinite.

Someone else speaks to salt, sings its praises. We heard from him today in the Sermon on the Mount. Looking out at his disciples, including us, Jesus announces, “You, you are the salt of the earth!” Like Neruda, Jesus talks to salt. A strange thing for anyone to do, but maybe not so strange if we recognize the salt as bringing home, even in its smallest quantities, the “inward flavor of the infinite.”

To put this in football language, Jesus catches a pass thrown by Neruda and runs down the field with it. The least bit of salt brings home “inward flavor of the infinite,” claims the poet, and Jesus then runs with this bold assertion, making an even bolder claim: his followers, all of them, are grains of salt through whom “inward flavor of the infinite” is encountered. Touchdown!

But do the countless fans who witness this feat roar forth their approval? Maybe not at first. For here, Jesus identifies every Christian as a living paradox. We are, each of us, so tiny, yet infinity shines forth through each of us.

Most of us don't feel like that most of the time. But sometimes, in diverse matters, we are called in this direction, and we must be ready to offer the right response, to serve as salt that has not lost its savor.

Our human discomfort with this role appears to have two aspects. First, we do not wish to appear so small. A grain of salt is easy to miss, inconsequential, unlikely to receive applause.

The second aspect is related to the first. Not only do we dislike appearing so small, but the focus on what Neruda calls the "inward flavor of the infinite" is not a focus on us; attention goes elsewhere.

Our spiritual practices can be a help here, as these practices remind us in different ways that we are not here to magnify ourselves, to draw attention to ourselves, to become large and massive, all for our own satisfaction. We are here to love and serve and give glory to God. We need reminders of this repeatedly. It is the easiest thing to forget.

And so, it is just fine that we are, and that we remain tiny grains of salt in God's vast world. As such, we can even do some good. It can even happen that the "inward flavor of the infinite" can be experienced through what we do. It may happen through one single, momentary action where our discipleship becomes unmistakable, when we sparkle as salt that has not lost its savor.

Here's a story from long ago that has proven surprisingly durable. It recounts a single action that sparkles with the inward flavor of the infinite.

In the fourth century of the contemporary era, a young man named Martin was serving in the Roman army near what is now the French city of Amiens. On a bitterly cold winter night, he encountered a beggar pleading for help near the city gate. All the other passersby ignored him; Martin wanted to help. But what could he do? He had no money or food or shelter to offer. So, he took off his big, warm army cloak, used his sword to cut it in two, gave one part to the beggar, and kept the other part for himself.

Something else happened that night. Martin had a dream, a big dream, one of the sort most of us have rarely, if at all. Jesus appeared in Martin's dream, accompanied by angels. The angels asked Jesus where he had received the half of a cloak he was wearing. Jesus replied that Martin had given it to him. The young soldier had responded in this costly way to what Jesus says at the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel, "I was naked and you gave me clothing."

At that time, Martin was a catechumen, engaged in the long and demanding process leading to baptism. Eventually, he was baptized and later became a monk. He founded the first monastery in Gaul, which became an important center for Christianity. Before his death in 397, Martin served many years as the bishop of Tours in the Loire Valley of what is now France.

Martin's life is well-documented. His witness is honored throughout the churches. The Episcopal Church keeps the feast of Martin of Tours on November 11. Churches throughout the world are named for him, including Anglican and Episcopal parishes in London, Philadelphia, Houston, and many other places.

Of all that can be said about Martin, what is most securely lodged in the memory of the church about him is how he helped someone in desperate need by splitting his own cloak in half. Why? Because the story shows so clearly the discipleship of Martin, even though at this point he was still awaiting baptism. We have in this story "the inward flavor of the infinite," a saltiness that remains forever.

Artwork from many places and many centuries depict the encounter between Martin and the beggar. Besides numerous icons, paintings, and statues, there is even a German Christmas stamp of 1984 that shows Martin on horseback, sword in hand, and the naked beggar receiving half of the cloak.

Talking to salt is a strange thing. Pablo Neruda did it in one of his odes. Jesus did it in the Sermon on the Mount. Martin heard himself addressed as salt in the pleading of a beggar.

God still talks to salt when we pray and find ourselves spoken to.

Perhaps you know what it is like to be addressed as salt, invisible grains that manifest the "inward flavor of the infinite."

Perhaps you will be addressed as salt in the days ahead, for certainly, our world stands in need of that "inward flavor of the infinite" available through the salt of discipleship.

Whatever the circumstances when you are summoned, do not close your heart. The world waits for what only you can provide.

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