

Grace and Peace to you from our Triune God, who preserves us, nurtures us, and calls us by name--who "keeps it salty" so the reign of God can be felt and seen on earth as it is in heaven.

To "keep it salty" or to "stay salty"--these terms aren't always understood in a positive light. According to the urban dictionary on the interwebs, these terms refer to "the act of being upset, angry, or bitter at someone as a result of being made fun of or embarrassed." These terms can be used to describe someone who is jealous of another person's success. They can refer to someone who's jokes are a bit racy or coarse. They can describe a person who's been toughened by experience, like a marine or someone who's seen too much of anything devastating--whose heart has been somewhat hardened much like our veins when we consume too much salt.

Today, we're going to be turning the intent of "keeping it salty" on its head, however. For, as stated in our Gospel text for this morning, salt and acting "salty" can be seen as good things in God's eyes. For starters, salt was most commonly used to preserve things, much like God has every intent to preserve our personhood and essence into eternity. No matter how much we try to mask ourselves from being who we truly are, we aren't fooling God. God isn't really interested in our attempts to pretend we're someone we're not. God made us just the way we are, so the more true to our essence we can be, the better.

The thing about salt is, no matter how much we try to water it down or dissolve it in substances, its essence remains in its natural state. Like us, it has immutable properties that don't necessarily change, but again, that is a good thing. To get right down to it, God doesn't want us to change who we are unless our change refers to a shift in recognizing "whose" we are and in whose love we can put our trust--that being the love of God in Christ.

What are some other cool facts about salt? Well, in ancient times, salt was a rather hot commodity. It was so valuable in ancient Rome that soldiers were sometimes paid with it. In fact, the word "salary" comes from the Latin word *sal*, for salt. When a soldier was doing a lousy job, his paycheck would be cut, which is how we got the expression "not worth his salt."

Salt has seasoned English in many ways, actually. Because Romans put salt or brine on their vegetables, the word "salad" developed. The term salvation even derives from the word salt! Isn't that cool? Again, salt is a preservative, much like God's eternal promises to us in Christ through salvation.

Right up to the 20th Century, salt was used as currency. It was moulded into bars and used as the basic currency in Ethiopia and other parts of mesopotamia. Venice, Italy may be famous for its canals now, but salt imports fueled its rise as an influential trade power by the end of the 13th century. Production and the transportation of salt gave rise to new cities like Salzburg of Italy as well, which means the "city of salt".

Also known as sodium chloride (NaCl), salt has 40 per cent sodium and 60 per cent chloride, by weight. Sodium, which is an essential mineral in salt, acts as an important electrolyte in the body. Yes, too much of it can cause harm to your body, but much like livestock, we need to consume certain amounts of salt to stay alive.

Finally, salt releases flavors in food, so to “keep it salty” can then refer to our calling to release the natural flavors of life in this world as God would have it. In addition to the over 40 references to salt in the Bible, Jesus bids us to be “salt of the earth” by directing us to our calling to preserve and keep fresh God’s good news and love for us in Christ. Suffice it to say, salt is an apt metaphor for permanence and the covenants God has bestowed upon us. Thus, our need to “keep it salty”, my friends, is pertinent--again, not in the bad way, but in the essential, preservative, and nutrient kind of way to which Christ refers.

Which brings us back to our Gospel lesson this morning. Just to preface things and give us some context, our lesson for today is a continuation from last week’s. Jesus is still holding a small child in his arms while instructing us and his disciples to never assert power over others or lead the powerless astray, particularly those who aren’t able to defend themselves entirely, or in the case of children, hardly at all. As is usually the case, Jesus is making references to or condemning oppressors and oppressive forces that assert control over the powerless, which can sometimes be us, our neighbors, entire countries, and our world. He is also uplifting anyone who works to exorcise or extract oppressive forces from the lives of people possessed by oppression.

Let me explain a little further. In our opening verses, John and the other disciples are ostracizing an exorcist who was casting out demons in Christ’s name. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name” John said, “and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” At this Jesus begins to teach. “Do not stop him” says Jesus, “for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus says. Jesus goes on, of course, and we’ll get to Jesus’ promotion of amputation vs. the unquenchable fires of hell in a moment, but let’s pause here. Let’s pause for a second to talk about demon possession.

When you think of demon possession, do you sometimes, like me, think of sensationalized movies like “The Exorcist” that have people climbing up walls and acting all buggy and uncontrollable because something dark, something really evil, is controlling their every movement? In comes a priest and the showdown, the battle between good and evil, begins. Full disclosure, I’ve never actually seen one of these movies (I think they’d make me want to continually slap myself in the forehead due to their lack of originality, so I avoid them) but still, I’ve seen the previews and they’re disturbing as all get out.

Now, I’m not saying dark forces do not exist in the world. I would be remiss to turn a blind eye to the existence of evil. People live in darkness and struggle with possession on a daily basis and this is what I want to draw our attention to versus the former

sensationalized version of demon possession. The former depictions I speak of often put the blame on an individual person due to their assumed lack of integrity, their personal behavior, or their unmentionable sins. But it's the oppressive forces of the world that are often left out of the picture in most movie scenes. It is these forces Jesus is drawing us toward and asking us to condemn.

See, at the time, Jesus and the people he walked alongside were occupied by the Roman army, an oppressive, imperial force whose pressures on people's lives caused serious disruption. What was happening is on par to what we're seeing in Afghanistan today or what we've seen in other countries ruled by dictators and colonial forces that make it their prerogative to control people and usurp them of their freedoms, customs, and traditions. The United States isn't off the hook for this, you know. I'm grateful for the freedoms we do have today, but we have a possessed history that we can't ignore either. I think of the health disparities that presently possess and disenfranchise our indigenous siblings, their communities, and people of color. Colonization is no joke and the aftereffects have huge consequences.

Take it from Frantz Fanon, a distinguished psychiatrist from France who took part in the Algerian Nationalist Movement. Fanon is one of the most important theorists of revolutionary struggle, colonialism, and racial difference in history. He wrote, "The Wretched of the Earth," published in 1961, which is described as "a brilliant analysis of the psychology of the colonized and their path to liberation. Bearing singular insight into the rage and frustration of colonized peoples, and the role of violence in effecting historical change, this book incisively attacks the twin perils of post-independence colonial politics: the disenfranchisement of the masses by the elites on the one hand, and intertribal and interfaith animosities on the other."

In his book, Fanon equates the behaviors of those controlled by oppressive forces to those described in Scripture as demon-possessed. Such parallels are significant and meant to be taken seriously by those of us whose ancestry has been shaped by colonial ideologies.

Which brings us to Jesus using shock value to really make his point in our Scripture text for this morning. He's not really bidding us to literally chop off our limbs if we become an oppressive stumbling block for others. He is calling us out on our stuff, though, and asking us to do all we can to ensure a person's God-ordained originality and freedoms are preserved. Therefore, if we see someone possessed by oppressive forces, be that drugs, low self-esteem, any sense of powerlessness, or by true abusive power by oppressors, we're called to do something about it or face the fires of Gehinnom, the Hebrew word for hell, which was actually a place outside of Jerusalem where the kings of Judah are known to have sacrificed children by fire according to Jeremiah, chapter 7 and 19 and other references in Scripture.

So, what Jesus is saying, my friends, is we have a responsibility to not only "keep it salty" but also face what are intrinsic, oppressive forces within ourselves that can cause ourselves or other people to stumble, preventing us from being our true selves. Such

forces are a part of our history and our internal, present day realities. We shouldn't just shove the aftereffects of oppression under the rug, bidding people or ourselves to just "get over it." That's like closing up a wound before it's had a chance to heal from the inside out, thus leading to infection and further harm. God is calling us into other ways of being than this. God is calling us to sprinkle on our saltiness--not on wounds, of course, (talk about ouch!) but rather on the earth, offering ways for people to really see themselves as God sees them.

And how does God see us? We all know the answer, right? God sees us as truly and forever beloved, dear ones. And we are ALL deserving of this love.

As a final note, and then I'll end, I see this as the perfect opportunity to pitch to you an educational series called "Wresting with the Truth of Colonization" that's coming up in October and is taking place online, over Zoom. (If you don't know how to use Zoom, I can participate with you in my office or downstairs, so don't let technology stop you). The series consists of 5, 2-hr evening sessions on Monday and Wednesday nights starting the 18th of October. Members of the Racial Justice Task Force of the Montana Synod are involved in the promotion of this event, which is being hosted by institutional and indigenous leaders throughout the northwest United States, Southern Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. I happen to head up our synod's Racial Justice Task Force and participation in this series. I want to invite all of you into this process.

I also want to acknowledge this topic as being heavy based on recent and complex racial uprisings in the United States. I ask you to be open to this opportunity, however, based on all that I spoke about today. It really is a journey for all of us to attempt as we seek to discover what are the lingering effects of oppressive forces that continue to possess us, neighboring communities, and our world. More details about this educational series to come but may we embark on this journey together for the sake of "keeping it salty", thus preserving God's good news of love in Christ for all the world to know and embrace. And with that I say, Amen. Can I get an Amen from you? AMEN!

Let us stand and let Jesus be our song as we journey into this adventure and any other encouragements from God that come our way.