

**Matthew 5:13-20**

*A Taste of Salt*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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When Yosuke Matsuoka was a little boy, his father's business went bankrupt and the family fell into extreme poverty; so, to save their son from starvation, Matsuoka's parents sent him from Japan to live with family members in Oregon. This was in 1893. While the move may have saved his life, it had other consequences, as well: because, while he was welcomed by a few, he suddenly found himself submerged in a larger culture that treated him like he was nothing. He went to school. He learned English. He eventually graduated from the University of Oregon, working his way through by waiting tables at a country club. But everywhere he went, he was subjected to both overt and subtle racism—the casual put-downs of both him and his homeland; the almost-unconscious assumptions that were conveyed, over and over, of the superiority of whiteness, and of the supposed right of the U.S. to dominate the world.

By the time Matsuoka returned to Japan as an adult, he had “a fine-tuned...hatred of things American.”<sup>1</sup> He went on to serve in the cabinet of Emperor Hirohito, a post from which he helped to propel Japan's entry into World War II, against the

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, “Japan's War: The Great Pacific Conflict” (United States of America: ©1986 by Edwin P. Hoyt) p. 191.

advice of the Japanese military, and spearheaded his nation's attacks on the United States of America.<sup>2</sup>

If you've ever eaten anything bitter, you know how the taste lingers. It's as though it sticks to the edges of the tongue, and it won't go away.

That seems to have been how Matsuoka's experiences stuck to him. How they built up in him as he endured insult after demeaning insult, until the bitterness turned to venom and the venom turned to war.

Jesus, today, calls us to spread a different kind of taste: the taste of salt. He adds that puzzling statement about salt losing its flavor—but that's not actually a possibility. Salt is salt. Its saltiness is an essential aspect of what it is. The only way to lose the taste of salt is to withhold it. To bottle it up and store it away.

But the thing is, we need salt. Humans and other mammals need salt to control our fluid balances and keep our muscles and nerves functioning. We need salt to preserve many different kinds of foods. We need salt to melt ice on slippery roads.

Just as the human tongue has special receptors for bitterness that make us want to spit it out, we also have special receptors for salt. Without it, food tastes flat. And here's an interesting thing: salt can actually counteract the taste of bitterness—it somehow adheres to the bitter compounds in foods, and takes away their potency.

And at the same time, salt magnifies the taste of sweetness. If you've ever accidentally omitted that pinch of salt from a cake recipe, you know the difference it makes.

It doesn't take much salt to neutralize the bitterness or boost the sweetness in food—just a little sprinkle—and what you could barely stand to swallow before, becomes delicious.

So when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he's telling us that we are essential to the functioning of the body human; we help to preserve life; we help to melt ice; and we transform what is bitter into something sweet.

Or, we *can* do all these things, if we are willing to pour ourselves out. And if there was ever a time that the world needed salt, it is now.

Imagine, if you will, the bitterness of having to flee your home to save your life, swimming rivers and crossing deserts with your child on your back, only to be rounded up like a criminal, detained behind barbed wire, and have your child ripped from your arms. Imagine being deported—back to the same country from

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, "Yosuke Matsuoka"

which you'd just escaped—only now, your child is lost in the system, untraceable, while you have no way of knowing what's happening to them. Imagine the bitterness you would take back with you.

Or imagine the bitterness of being an American—a citizen born of citizens for hundreds of years back—only to be treated as less-than from the moment of your birth because of the color of your skin. To be told that you are not a “real” American. Imagine paying the same tax rate as everyone else, only to have the institutions for which you are paying—education systems, healthcare systems, banking systems, public safety and legal systems—either denied you or used against you day after day after day?

Or imagine the bitterness of veterans returning from multiple deployments with broken bodies and PTSD, only to find the systems that were supposed to care for them made worthless through underfunding and incompetent management—all while the people responsible wave flags and talk about supporting the troops.

And there is the bitterness of rural America, left to languish while innovation goes elsewhere; the bitterness of the inner cities, where there's never enough money for services but always enough to build stadiums; the bitterness of laborers whose hard work gets them nowhere while CEOs gets handed a golden parachute for performing poorly. I could go on: couldn't you?

And the bitterness of all of these people adheres to them and gets stuck to the people around them. It's making the whole world angrier and angrier and more and more dangerous.

We need salt.

In this case, of course, salt is a metaphor—but a metaphor for what? What, exactly, are we to do to counteract the bitterness that's poisoning our world?

Jesus lodges the answer in righteousness—righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Their righteousness was based on dividing people up—Jew vs. Gentile, clean vs. unclean, insider vs. outsider. Jesus' righteousness was based on removing those divisions, and on loving everyone, including one's enemies.

Isaiah also offers a recipe to counteract the pious hypocrisies and exploitive systems that had God ready to spit them out as a nation: Stop praying and fasting, he says, while you profit from injustice. Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the yoke of bondage and let the oppressed go free; treat workers fairly, share your bread with the hungry, welcome the homeless, clothe the naked, care for your family.

So he's speaking both of addressing the symptoms of injustice—by feeding and sheltering and clothing those who need it; but also of addressing the unjust systems that create those symptoms: the systems that exploit and oppress so that people can't find a way out. Because that's where bitterness really takes hold.

And I think we can all see that bitterness taking hold throughout the world. I feel it myself, some days—angry and bitter and all bottled-up.

But we are not called to be bitterness. We are called to be salt. To do everything in our power to counteract the causes of bitterness. To pour ourselves out to draw out the sweetness in the world.

What if Yosuke Matsuoka had encountered friendship, rather than bullying? Respect, rather than disdain?

We can't say that befriending Matsuoka would have prevented Pearl Harbor—but we can't say for sure that it wouldn't have.

And we can't know for sure what wars and bombings and mass shootings, or what addictions or eating disorders or suicides might be prevented by treating our fellow citizens and the citizens of this world with decency and kindness and respect. But I think we can say for sure that what's being handed out right now is one big, bitter pill, and it is poisoning us all.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. The salt.

So don't bottle yourself up. On the larger level, stand up to the systems of oppression. Listen to those who have been made voiceless. Reach out to those who have been alienated and ostracized.

And on the smaller level, sprinkle kindness. Sprinkle decency. Sprinkle respect. Sprinkle justice.

Let's pour the best of who we are out on this bitter world, and make it sweet for everyone.