



“What Just a Pinch of Salt Can Do”
Scripture – Matthew 5:13-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 9, 2020

If Will heard his father say it once, he heard him say it a thousand times. Whenever he made a mistake, his father would say, “Well, that wasn’t very smart.” His father harbored no ill intentions. He believed his words would challenge Will to up his game. However, what Will internalized was, “*You’re* not very smart.”

As you would predict, over time Will became increasingly cautious. He was hesitant to attempt anything new – no matter how interesting – because if it did not work out, he knew that – like a weight lifter dropping a massive barbell – his father would drop those words he only heard as condemnation – “*You’re* not very smart.”

Studies have shown that negative comments have a far greater impact on a person’s self-esteem than positive ones. Tell a child that he is a loser; tell a child she is an embarrassment; tell a child that he is lazy and, if you do it repeatedly, your child will live into the script you unintentionally created. Studies indicate that with children, it requires ten positive comments to counteract one criticism.

Interestingly, it is not a great deal different with adults. The Harvard Business Review reports on research that examined 60 strategic leadership teams at a large company. “The factor that made the greatest difference between the most and least successful teams was the ratio of positive comments to negative ones ... They discovered that on the highest-performing teams there were six positive comments for every negative one. On the medium-performance teams there were two positive comments for every negative one. And on the low-performing teams there were three negative comments for every positive one.”¹

The study recognized that negative feedback has its place in avoiding disasters, “but even the most well-intentioned criticism can rupture relationships and undermine self-confidence and initiative. Criticism can change behavior, but it does not prompt people to put forth their best efforts. Positive encouragement is what motivates people to continue doing what they’re doing well, and do it with more vigor, determination, and creativity.”² It’s elementary, my dear Watson. People respond better to encouragement and praise than they do to faultfinding.

Last week we pondered the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount that start with nine blessings. Today we hear what follows the Beatitudes. Jesus has led his disciples up a steep, grassy hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and he has attracted the attention of farmers, fisherman, stone masons, and others who have left their homes to hear this upstart rabbi.

Because Matthew has never laid his eyes on the Alps, he describes Jesus scaling a mountain to address a starving crowd. Fed up with leaders who were in collusion with the occupying Romans; disgusted with a system that

rewarded wealthy landowners while relegating the masses to poverty; and repelled by religious teachings that condemned and ostracized, the people were ravenous for a fresh word.

And they were not disappointed. With his provocative opening words, Jesus told them that those who are blessed are not the ones living in mansions and wearing fine clothes and ordering servants around. Rather, those who are blessed are the poor in Spirit, the meek, those who are persecuted and the peacemakers.

Following those nine jolting blessings intended to set off fireworks in their brains, I suspect Jesus paused long enough for people to catch their breath and to contemplate his radical reassessment of who is blessed in the eyes of God.

While his initial volley is still simmering – lifting their spirits rather than squashing them – Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Even though Jesus was not privy to studies reported in the *Harvard Business Review* or *Psychology Today*, he knew that praise rather than criticism, blessing rather than curse, is the way to inspire. “You are the salt of the earth!”

Today, people in the medical field warn that salt is the evil enemy because many people overdo it. But as every athlete or person who works in the heat will tell you, a lack of salt in your system is dangerous. That’s why Gatorade was invented! Salt balances the fluid in our bodies and impacts the way our muscles and nerves function. In the warm, arid climate of ancient Palestine, people knew that salt could be a lifesaver. Jesus and the prophets command us to save lives by seeking justice and working for peace.

This metaphor Jesus employed to describe faithful followers had other implications. Lacking the modern convenience of refrigeration, preserving food was a challenge. Salt was a precious commodity as it kept food from spoiling. Naming us the salt of the earth, Jesus expects us to preserve what is good and true, and to help prevent people from going bad and communities from decaying.

Of course salt not only keeps food from deteriorating, we sprinkle it on to enrich the flavor of food. Good cooks know that if the stew is bland, a pinch of salt will give it zest. Jesus counts on us to add flavor to life, to give it some punch. Regrettably, many churches have more often been known for the opposite: For smothering ingenuity with rigidity, for tamping down excitement with sternness and for sucking the joy out of celebrations with solemnity. Jesus calls on us to be the seasoning and spice that injects life with joy.

In a book entitled *Salt: A World History*, the author writes, “Until about one hundred years ago, salt was one of the most sought after commodities in human history...The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits. Religious covenants were often sealed with salt. Salt was used to disinfect wounds and treat skin diseases. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt... Brides and grooms rubbed salt on their bodies to enhance fertility.”³

I did not make that up; and do not ask me how they did it, I have no idea! Suffice it to say that as salt had a variety of positive uses, and as followers of Jesus, we too, can enhance the quality of life for ourselves and for others.

A colleague shares a story about St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. It has mainly been known as the church where Johann Sebastian Bach was the music director and Mozart played the organ. However, “in the months preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall, people gathered every Monday for prayers and to discuss how to end the separation of East and West Germany. As more and more Christians showed up for prayer and to discuss reuniting East and West there were warnings against the Monday prayers; but the people refused to stop. Eventually a confrontation became inevitable.”

“Fearing the size of the Monday night gathering on October 9, 1989, the police issued a warning that any demonstration would be stopped ‘with whatever means necessary.’ Doctors of nearby hospitals stopped by the

church to inform the pastor that they were making preparations to deal with the flood of gunshot wounds they were anticipating.”

“The pastor did not know what to expect. On that October evening, 7,000 people crammed into the church and over 70,000 stood on the streets surrounding the church. Each person held a candle in their hands – which was a symbol of non-violence. To keep a candle from going out on a cold October night, you have to hold the candle with both hands, which makes it impossible to throw a rock.”

“There alongside the 70,000 people in the streets were the tanks of the empire, ready if the protestors turned violent. But they never did. When someone began to get agitated the group would call out, ‘No violence!’ and everyone would settle down. A government official said later, ‘We had done all the planning. We were ready for anything – except candles and prayers.’ The tanks withdrew.”⁴ And in a few days the wall came down.

You are the salt of earth when you possess the courage to seek justice and work for peace. You are the salt of the earth when you are compassionate and generous. You are the salt of the earth when you spread joy and inspire hope. May you spice up people’s lives and bring out the right flavor in the world.

NOTES

1. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, “The Ideal Praise-to-Criticism Ratio,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 15, 2013.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Debie Thomas quoting Mark Kurlansky, “Salty,” posted February 2, 2020.
4. Ignacio Castuera, “Lectionary Commentary,” *ProcessandFaith.com*, January 29, 2017.