Salt of the Earth
July 11, 2010 - MCCC

***During the Summer, I will be preaching on the Sermon on the Mount. This is an introduction of sorts to that series.

Matthew 5:13-16

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.

In my family growing up, Salt was King. We couldn’t get enough of the stuff. Salt on french fries, chicken, baked potatoes, eggs, corn, beans, soup, cucumbers, and it was even an acceptable as a dressing for Salad. However, my wife dutifully informed me after we wed that the salt was off the table. That was a major adjustment for me. Now I know there are health risks with salt, high blood pressure for one, but if only I knew then what I know now....maybe I could have argued myself out of it.

Because I have learned that Salt, of all the table condiments, plays a quite prominent role in the biblical tradition. It turns out that God is a big fan of salt. Not just in the Judeo-Christian tradition either, its been used in religious ritual and ceremony in Greco-Roman Religions, Islam, Wiccan, and Shinto...and many others.

In the Bible, however, there are over 40 references to salt. And its not just about making sure their lamb chops and legumes taste better. In our passage today, right near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks us to be the Salt of the Earth. Now, this analogy is used frequently and has even been borrowed in the cultural lexicon..."That guy was the Salt of the Earth" man...great guy.” But as it turns out there’s more to the phrase than meets the eye that may help us understand the Sermon on the Mount better and the call we have to be faithful people.

Consider this...

Salt was used anytime someone brought an offering to the Lord. Leviticus 2:13 says, “Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.” Ezekiel 43:24 says, “24 You shall present them before the LORD, and the priests shall throw salt on them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the LORD.”
Salt had a profound and prominent religious purpose. It was used in offering sacrifices to God, part of the central focus of ancient Israel’s worship. Every offering that is made, salt is included.

For the ancients, salt was important to their very livelihood, so it would reason that it would be important in religious ritual. It was used as a preservative for the food to prevent meats’ decay and corruption. It was used to clean and even to bathe in. But we see here in our passage from Leviticus that every offering that is made, salt is used.

The salt, you see, symbolized steadfast and faithful presence of God and a reminder of God’s redeeming power. As the salt preserved many things in their own lives practically, it also reminds them of God preserving and keeping them as well.

In fact, there emerges in the Bible, a strange and unfamiliar phrase -- a covenant of Salt. You heard in Leviticus 2 talking about “salt of the covenant.” Numbers 18:19 says, “it is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and your descendants as well.” And 2 Chron 13:5 says “5 Do you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?”

The Covenant of Salt that Ancient Israel, including Jesus, was familiar with proclaimed God’s faithfulness, God’s redeeming power, and God’s everlasting presence in their lives. The covenant from a God, who first loved them, that saved them from the grips of slavery. And a covenant that called the people of God to be a Holy people and to give this same kind of redemptive love to the world. We salt, because God first salted us.

At another mountain, Mount Sinai, God gave ancient Israel a covenant and commandments. Exodus 19:3-6

3 Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”
Ex 19:3-6 (NRSV)

God tells Israel, remember how I bore you on eagles’ wings and redeemed you from slavery, and so my call to you is to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom. A covenant of love, remembrance, and issued with a call to them for faithfulness and holiness. We know later in Leviticus and other passages that salt is added to their offerings to remember this very thing.

We can easily correlate this story with our story here today in the 5th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. If you didn’t know, Matthew often correlates Jesus with Moses in his Gospel. And so here we have our 1st Century Moses, Jesus, the one who delivers the word of God for the people of God in that time and place. The One who defines and
embodies the covenant with God. Here it is Jesus who climbs up the mountain and then teaches us about a way of life and a way of being that honors our relationship with God. It is here in the Gospel that we receive many of the teachings of Jesus, commandments if you will, that describes what the faithful life might look like.

A new covenant is made and a revived teaching through Jesus. And this time, the offering made by the community needs to be sprinkled with salt. Sprinkled with reminders of God’s redeeming acts of the past. Sprinkled with reminders of God’s steadfastness and faithfulness. Sprinkled with examples of love and holiness. We are to be the Salt of the Earth. We are to embody the teachings. We are to point to that which is greater than us.

Jesus says, “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.”

You are the ones, Jesus says, who will carry out God’s covenant. If you don’t live out what I’m about to teach you, the salt will lose its saltiness, it won’t be as powerful, it won’t be as transforming.

As so we will listen attentively to Jesus’ teachings in this Sermon on the Mount. And we will learn to be SALT to the world. To embody the covenant God has made. To be people who turn the other cheek. People defined by Love, not Anger. People who are faithful to one another. People who do not take revenge. People of humility. People full of forgiveness and understanding, not Judgement. People who love their enemies.

Salt of the earth people as they come to live faithful lives, as they make their offering of self to God, come remembering that God is faithful, that God first loved us. But it doesn’t end there. As Salt of the Earth people we embody and spread that redemptive love to others as well. So as you sprinkle your salt this week, or if you just look longingly at it in your cupboard, remember that we are all called to be the Salt of the Earth!