

Just a Pinch of Salt

Matthew 5:13-20

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Good morning, everyone. I originally crafted this sermon for First UCC Church on Webster Street for a service last month. They specifically asked for a message on compassion and kindness. I asked to use today's lectionary scriptures which fit in perfectly with their focus. I have added portions to speak to you, specifically.

Today, I want to talk about kindness and compassion that Jesus demonstrated at the Sermon on the Mount. Just as all of you can share your compassion stories, I will raise two of my own. My purpose is not to teach you compassion; you know that already. However, these stories had unexpected outcomes that may help us to better understand Jesus' message on the "Mount."

In my early career, in the last millennium in fact, I served as a social worker. My prime competency at that time was being able to speak Spanish. For the first two years, I certified applicants for welfare benefits. Spanish, you might ask? Why was that important?

I was the translator for migrant workers in Manitowoc County. I had just graduated from UW-Madison with a Spanish major. Did I know my grammar? Pretty well. Did I know the rules of public benefits? Not quite. I learned them along the way, doing the best I could.

One day, a gentleman came in requesting benefits for his family. This was the later 1970s -- a time of high unemployment, gas embargoes, staggering interest rates and a sinking economy. This man, a local resident, spoke English -- no translating needed that day. He did nothing wrong; he simply lost his job as had many.

I declared him eligible for benefits; explained how and when a check would be cut. He also needed to sign up at Job Service to look for employment possibilities. That's a no brainer in times of recession. But I did warn him about an encounter he would have to endure.

The Job Service worker who interviewed our clients delighted in humiliating them. She would make comments like "Now, I understand why I'm sitting on this side of the desk and you're over there." While the applicant sat in my office, I encouraged him to comply with the requirements but ignore the insults. It was a necessary step, but it would only last 30 minutes or so. End of story -- or so I thought.

Years later, I progressed to different caseloads. I now visited clients throughout the county, working with them to remain independent in their homes. Coming back to the office on a snowy January day, I slid off the highway avoiding an oncoming truck that had skidded into my lane. Snow drifts captured my car 50 yards off the road. I eventually climbed out, trudged my way back to the highway. A squad car waited for me on the shoulder. Evidently someone had contacted the sheriff's department on their "CB Radio" -- this was long before cell phones.

The officer filled out the paperwork and radioed in my particulars. Ten minutes later, a pick-up truck, not a towing service, drew behind the squad car. Neither the officer, nor I, knew who drove this truck. A man approached the officer.

"I heard your call on my CB." Back then, lots of people listened to police reports on their citizen band radios.

Looking past the officer, he told me "I heard your name in the report. I came right away to help you out. I just wanted to return the favor." I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. He later confided that I had helped him that day, years before, applying for benefits. He successfully completed his interview at Job Service and now supported his family in a new job.

He returned to his truck, pulled out towing chains and released my little Honda from the snow drifts in the field.

As one of my friends always claimed, "Acts of kindness are never wasted."

Jesus knew that too. He spoke to crowds on that mount that day. He claimed his listeners were the "salt of the earth." Considering he "coined the term," an unusual description for human behavior. Jesus used salt as a metaphor in two ways: a flavoring agent and a preservative.

A little salt sprinkled on food definitely improves its flavor. So, it is with us too. A little salt, perhaps we can insert the words "kindness" or "compassion," can go a long way. Jesus taught that improving the flavor of life for those around us provides immediate benefits for those who experience them, but also brings us closer to the realm of God.

"Acts of kindness are never wasted."

Jesus held on to one more aspect of salt – a preservative. What was Jesus talking about? We probably consider our freezers the best way to store food, or maybe even canning. But civilizations for millennia used salt to preserve food. While we have few examples of Jesus cooking, he may have suggested this metaphor as a preservative of Jewish law and the prophets.

Many expected Jesus to deliver a completely new message. Many hoped for a new life of prosperity, freedom from Roman rule, an era of Jewish domination. Sadly, Jesus brought none of those things. He taught something better.

Jesus proclaimed "You already know the law and the prophets. I'm not here to change anything; the laws of our ancestors will be followed to the letter." Jesus even raised up the scribes and Pharisees as an example. We may snicker, "Well, that's a pretty low bar!"

Let's orient to roughly 30 AD. It struck the listeners as next to impossible; the Pharisees and scribes were the experts of Jewish law. While many despaired at his teaching, Jesus offered us new ways of achieving kindness and compassion. New ways to trust God's promises. The laws would be preserved as first given to the Jewish community – then and now.

We prayed those beatitudes earlier in the service. We claim those blessings still today. We can think of hundreds of opportunities to share compassion and kindness with the "poor in spirit," "those mourning," "the peacemakers."

We strive to be “pure in heart,” and meek. Consider meekness, not as cowardly or easily bamboozled. Perhaps “humble” would be a better term. Just as we’ve heard “seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” Last week our junior youth in Sunday School talked about kindness as a way to bring the Kingdom to earth right now.

Jesus told the crowds that day that they, too, were the “light of the world.” He cautioned not to put one’s lamp under a basket, but high on a lampstand. Once again, great advice. Not only would you be serving the Kingdom of God, you’d also avoid burning down your house!

Even Pope Francis urged Christians to shine brightly and always overcome the temptation to shine light upon themselves. Calling it ‘mirror spirituality’ he said “it is a bad thing to want to shine light onto oneself: Be light to illuminate, be salt to give flavor and to preserve.”

How can we share this light? Simply inviting others into the light with us. It may be an invitation to check out the Christmas Tree lot. It may be inviting a school friend to attend a youth night, simply to share a modest meal. It may be hosting speakers who help us understand injustice issues others face every day. However we draw someone into the light, let us take action to support them anyway we can.

Years ago, here at Union, we asked representatives from the community to speak about social justice issues faced by their clients. I volunteered to arrange a session with The Wise Women Gathering Place, a community support group hosted by women of the Oneida tribe. They teach others to be midwives – they practice “cradle to grave” care for all people regardless of tribal status. They’re located in a store front office space in the mall near the airport. Their hours are limited, posted on the front door, but a phone number is always available.

I never knew the plight of way too many Native American women. They endure far higher rates of abduction and murder than the general population. Many abductions occur along remote gas pipelines on reservation lands, far from the safety of community police.

The Gathering Place also provides safe keeping for the homeless. It sponsors a care space at a privately disclosed parking lot for people sheltering in their cars. The Wise Women arrange for them to have access to water and sanitation. Would I have known anything about these conditions without reaching out for a 30-minute presentation? No, but it started with a simple invitation, drawing into their light.

May I leave you with one more story of unwasted kindness? Some of you know that I teach a memoirs class at UWGB. I volunteered for the job simply because a previous instructor simply could not continue. My formal training in memoirs? Zip. My experience with it? I had taken several classes and simply like writing.

After each session, I get class evaluations. No one gushes over my wittiness, my terrific insights into the written word or my colorful Power Points. But what I hear most often is “She makes me feel safe. I can share my stories without embarrassment. I want to share them even more.”

As salt of the earth, we simply need to find more places to share that salt. Turn on the lamp, so others can join us in that light.

Jesus spoke to the multitudes that day on the Mount. We sat there too, amid the crowds. We heard that we are the salt of the earth – flavoring life to those around us, finding freedom and goodness in God’s laws then and now. Our works need not be elaborate, scripted, one-of-a-kind events. A simple

smile to someone without a friend, a coloring book to a child new to the service, a newspaper (or should I say “story on cable news”) exposing those who suffer unjust conditions – all of these bring us closer to God and the kingdom here on earth.

Let me finish this message with a translation of today’s hymn, “You Are The Seed.” Direct translations differ from poetic interpretations. The lyricist’s words vary a bit from the translation shown. Let me offer a translation a bit closer to the original text. Jesus is speaking to us now, through the words of Cesario Gabaraín.

You are the seed that must grow,
You are the star that must shine.
You are the yeast, the grain of salt,
The torch that must show the way.

You are the morning born again,
You are the wheat that begins to seed.
You are the stinger and the caress at the same time,
You are the witnesses that I will send.

Go, my friends, throughout the world,
Announcing love, messages of life, peace and pardon.
Be, my friends, witnesses of my resurrection,
Go carrying my presence; I am with you all.

May we be blessed by God’s holy words. Amen.

++++ Sources +++++

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