

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for Those Who are Persecuted
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Psalm 112; Matthew 5:13

Low key my squad is so salty about the tea I spilled. They are throwing shade, no cap. But I know I pass the vibe check. They all want to be this mood, period.

If you have no idea what I just said there is a good chance you are over 30, it's also possible that I, an over 30 someone, used all that slang incorrectly. Every generation comes up with their own lingo. We used to have groovy or chill. Some of you use to say wassup or peace. Actually any group of people that have something in common that is central to their identity have terms or gestures that will be special to just their group.

Slang words help us know who is "one of us" and who is not. It creates a sense of belonging. When I was in marching band in high school the trumpet section would yell "ANTILOG" at each other in the parking lot before and after school and chant it before big performances. No one else in the band ever knew what it meant. Significant others tried to get them to spill the truth. When I was drum major I tried to convince them I was a leader of all the sections and so technically a member of the trumpet section and should know what ANTILOG meant. NO ONE ELSE EVER KNEW, except the trumpet section. A few years after graduation I asked someone and they laughed and said "Oh, it never actually meant anything," but I think that was just a line and I will never know the truth because I am an outsider.

Most of the lingo and gestures in a community develop naturally and for no particular reason, however others come about on purpose to fill a need the community has.

When early Christians were being persecuted and killed for their faith, they had to come up with an insider code that would distinguish who was safe to talk to about their faith and who was not. They came up with the ichthys. We have probably all seen the ichthys. The stick fish people now put on the back of their cars or on jewelry. The fish is made up of two arched lines. If a christian met someone on the road and they wanted to test if they were safe or not they would casually draw an arch in the sand. If the other person was also a Christian they would draw another arch to make the ichthys, the fish. This would let both parties know it was safe to talk about house church meetings. If the other person was not a Christian then the person who drew the arch would go undetected because they were only idly playing in the sand as they talked.

Salt, from today's verse, is insider lingo. It was something the followers of Jesus could say to one another and they would instantly know what was meant. It was a coded term that held more meaning the more you were on the inside. One of the geniuses of using the word salt is that it is a common mineral and universal. Just about every culture has learned the value of salt. It can be found all over the earth so it is actually a very clever term for Jesus to introduce to his disciples. Salt has all kinds of importance. It is valuable in Jesus'

time, it preserves, it makes our roads safe now, it exfoliates, it was used in pottery, tanning, dying cloth, and soap. But the use I want us to focus on is it's usefulness on food.

Salt is key to a good dish. I learned this from every cooking show ever made. They are always talking about salt usage. The tasters complain when something isn't salted enough, but as we know too much of a good thing is also trouble. Too much salt ruins a meal, and our blood pressure and cholesterol. The chefs that can master salt are always the ones who win the competitions.

Salt has a unique characteristic as a seasoning, it has its own flavor profile but it also brings out the flavor of whatever it is put on. If we put salt in water we would say it tastes salty. Or if too much salt is used on a dish it is too salty. But when used correctly the saltiness subsides and the other flavors shine alongside salt. Salt is unique. It's its own individual flavor, but is best when it is in union with other flavors.

Now this can be counter intuitive. We assume if I am letting your flavor shine then it must mean my flavor is diminished. But as I was writing this sermon I was snacking on Cheez-Its and I could easily taste the salt and the cheese at the same time. They complement each other. When salt is added to a dish it somehow brings out the flavors that are there while also being its own flavor entirely.

Salt goes with just about everything too. Some flavors, like mint and citrus, don't go together so well, but salt is able to complement a wide variety of flavors when used in the right proportion. I've seen people put salt on watermelon, but I still think the salt and chocolate pairing is the height of partnerships. Salt adds value to a dish and brings out the best in the flavors it is in union with.

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus says. He is claiming the characteristics of the mineral salt for us. We are meant to be unique. We are meant to have our own relationship with God and our own personality, our own spiritual expression. AND we are supposed to be in union with others to bring out their uniqueness. We are there to add value to the spaces and conversations we find ourselves in, as partners.

To become the best partners, the best salt we can be, we need two things to happen: 1) to take care of our own flavor, and 2) to add value with our presence.

The first one, take care of our own flavor means to know who you are and stop worrying about other people's flavor. We are given a unique flavor profile in life - our personalities, how we express ourselves outwardly, our sexuality, our race, our gender, our inabilities, our strengths. These, and more, are what make us uniquely us. These things come together to make individual human beings. Beings that each bear the image of God.

Too many times we fall into the trap of being someone the world wants us to be instead of just being ourselves. We have all at sometime felt the pressure to change ourselves to meet an expectation. Maybe we wore a style of clothes or did our hair in a way that was not at all flattering to us, but because everyone else was in those styles we forced ourselves into that same standard. By ignoring our true style, our unique flavor profile, we do damage to the image of God we hold by not being true to who WE were created to be.

This not only hurts ourselves, it hurts the people around us. Because when we think it is so important to be this way, we negate the value of all the other ways of being because we are saying this way is better. This way is worth endless effort to squeeze ourselves into it. In order to justify our efforts, to meet the norm expectations, we unknowingly, or sometimes actively, bully others to fit in too. Because if I'm doing all this work to fit in, I am going to make you feel guilty for not working just as hard as me. And we have all had this guttural reaction seeing someone who isn't as clean as we keep ourselves, or isn't actively trying not to be awkward in public, or isn't keeping their voice down. We think "Eh, what is their problem?" but in reality they might be more authentic to their flavor than we are being to ours, and we're just jealous that we put so much effort suppressing ourselves into a standard that...we don't really like.

Now I give you the clothing example because it's easy to laugh at the shared experience of wearing something unflattering, but this is a serious issue. People are dying trying to fit our cultural standards because not everyone can be the same. And when the world screams at you that you need to FIT IN and you inherently don't, the only way out seems to be at the bottom of a bottle of pills or to kick the chair out from under you.

70% of transgender teens in our country have seriously thought about killing themselves this year. This is because our culture, and truthfully, our religion, has declared their identity an abomination. They hear the message that their flavor is unwanted. In truth, the Bible says nothing against transgender individuals and in fact the first convert to Christianity is a eunuch (the time period's only understanding of a gender non conforming person). I heard a theologian say "God created transgender people for the same reason God created grapes and wheat. So that humans can participate in the act of creation." We take the raw materials and make something else. We take grapes and make wine, we take wheat and make bread, we take a human born in a male body and create a beautiful woman.

This past week was transgender awareness week so I wanted to highlight the severity of what happens when we do not take care of our own flavor and spend more time worrying about others. 350 transgender people were murdered this year (that we know of), some of them burned alive, the youngest was 15. We are so concerned about what the right "flavors" are, we are so concerned about making people fit the standard, that whole communities of people are suffering. We are to test our teachings and actions against the fruits of the Spirit. Looking at what kind of fruit is produced by a biblical interpretation, if we do this with our ideas about gender, it is safe to say the fruit being handed to our transgender siblings is rotten.

We need to be salt. The cultural standards are not what God wants for us. We have to look inside and find that image of God and pull it out and respect the image that others are discovering. We need to understand our own selves, our own flavor, our personality, our sexuality, our inabilities, our gender... the things that make us who we are as image bearers of God. The things that will never change no matter how badly we want to fit into that norm. Know your flavor so you can add value to the places God puts you.

This second part of being salt is to add value. This is what salt does when it is used in the right proportion. We can become too much and overpower other flavors with our uniqueness. We can be too little and disappear in the array of the other flavors. This balance is a constant adjustment depending on what is happening around us. However, no matter what space we find ourselves in, our job is to be salt, to add value.

When we do the work to know our individual flavor strengths we become better value adders.

Some spaces will be like the Cheez-Its. We can meet the others in the room equally and enjoy the partnership of two great flavors. We all have those friends with whom conversation always flows smoothly, or the co-worker with whom you brainstorm and brilliance always surfaces. It's natural and balanced.

Some spaces are going to be teaming with other flavors and our job will be to not overpower the voices of the others. I am someone who has ideas. I was that kid in school who always raised my hand. But I have learned this is not always the best scenario. Often if I keep my hand down, someone else will have a similar idea and then we can riff off of one another to synergize something even better. I have to hold back my flavor for a time to get a sense of the other flavors and voices in the space with me. This way I find the flavors who want to work together.

Some spaces will be bland with not much going on and we will get to be the champion and save the day. I read a study recently that most people enjoy being talked to on the bus. I know, I know this sounds wrong. What the researchers did is they asked people waiting at a bus stop if they would be willing to start a conversation with someone when they got on. The ones who agreed then got on the bus and went into action. At the end of the exchange the person who started the conversation gave the unknowing conversationalist a paper explaining what had just happened. This paper asked both parties to check in with researchers by email and answer a questionnaire. The conversation starter always felt nervous and awkward. They worried the person was going to be mad they were interrupting their commute. The person to whom they were talking was overwhelmingly relieved and had a positive reaction to the conversation. Many of them said they were happy to have the change in pace and human interaction. There will be times we get to take the lead and let our flavor shine.

And taking the time to care about our own flavors will help us know how to find the balance in whatever space we are adding value in.

We are the salt of the earth. We have a unique flavor that we need to cherish. This means ignoring the standards the world wants to force upon us and making sure we aren't reinforcing the standards that are antiquated and dangerous. We have the ability to bring out the flavors around us. Either by our equal participation, reserved observation, or active presence, we are to bring flavor, increasing value to every space we find ourselves in.

So when I see you in the parking lot and yell "SALT," we will know what the lingo means now because we belong to a special group called Christians, and we are the salt of the earth.