Sermon
(7:45a & 6:00p only)
September 30, 2018 - Proper 21B
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD

For many years, may wife and I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. And, while we lived in Berkeley/Oakland (directly east of the Golden Gate), our bird-watching hobby took us all around the Bay. Going south from Oakland towards San Jose, we could arrive at a birding "hotspot" — the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge. Contained within the refuge's boundaries is 8,000 acres of, what has been for many years, salt evaporation ponds owned by Cargill. Flying into the either Oakland or San Francisco, we could see these ponds — pumpkin-colored because of the salt-saturated brine. When we got closer than the 5,000 foot view, we could see salt deposits, mosaics of salt crystals. After several years, the crystals were "harvested" for further purification and sale. Similar salt ponds are found at the Dead Sea. If you've traveled there, you might have seen them. They are found, too, in any other parts of the world, from India to Australia to Peru.

The widespread nature of salt productions attests to sodium chloride's importance And its various uses have been so long recognized that "salt" could be used as a metaphor. We're probably <u>most</u> familiar with its use in the Gospels, as we just heard. But salt-as-metaphor has been used in other cultures/religions. Certainly it appears in the Hebrew scriptures, and was, thus, the source of much commentary by the rabbis. The Romans used it as a metaphor/symbol of wisdom. The absence of salt was seen as an ill omen. Too much salt could render land barren, hence the plowing of salt into a destroyed city . . . to keep it from rising again.

In contrast to that "negative metaphor" of destruction, however, we have, I think, three positive metaphorical uses of "salt" in the last few verses of our Gospel reading. These three sayings are generally considered by scholars to be connected by nothing other than the word "salt". Perhaps. But I'd like to take a stab at producing a link, not only applicable to Mark's audience but to us as well. And, while I don't want to push another metaphor <u>too</u> far, I see a sort of trinitarian structure to this bi-chemical image.

Probably the most familiar, or ready-to-mind, quality of salt is as a seasoning. The ubiquity of salt shakers on tables, or salt packets in fast-food restaurants, attests to our desire to have flavors enhanced. "Salt", as you probably know, is one of the five flavor receptors on our tongues (the others being sour, bitter, sweet, and umami). Taste/flavor scientists have discovered that all of those flavor receptors work together, so that salt doesn't just "do" salt-ness", but, in low concentrations, reduces bitterness and increases sweet (think salt on grapefruit). In higher concentrations, it suppresses sweetness and enhances umami (the "taste" imparted by monosodium glutamate, "MSG"). There's almost a "Goldilocks and the three bears" quality to salt-as-seasoning: in some cases, too much does the trick,; in others, too little. Most of us see the "just right" amount.

I don't see "salt-as-seasoning" as a really good metaphor (as some do) for the present of Christians in a wider society. I suppose we could "reduce bitterness and increase sweetness", but I fear in the "high concentrations" we've been seeing over the last several decades, we've suppressed sweetness". Instead I want to interpret "salt-as-seasoning" in the context of a Christian community. We wee an example, I think, of this in our reading from James. The whole book is a sort of guide for a community's life. And, here, we heard about how to keep a community together — "salting" one another with shared troubles, shared joys, shared failings, an admission that, by ourselves, we are somehow lacking. The seasoning that communal honesty and care provides enhances and strengthens community bonds.

A second, fairly common, use for salt is as a preservative. We see this, of course, in foods such as salt pork, or in the brine of pickles. I see this aspect of the metaphor at play in Mark as well

as in the injunction to "have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another" (50). The "salt" I see here is that commitment to God that means keeping the community drawn together in God's name, strong and healthy. It is the commitment that lies behind Esther's action, as we heard in our first reading.

You know the story: Esther, a Jew, become queen to King Ahasuerus. While serving, her uncle Mordecai incurs the wrath of Human by refusing to bow down as he goes past. Haman decides, that to rid himself of Mordecai, he will have all the Jews killed. Esther learns of this and, though putting her life in danger, successfully pleads for the life of the Jews. Her commitment to her people— the salt with herself—overrode her concern for her own safety. She was clear about who she was at her core. For her, it was not about being queen, although she used that privileged position to advantage. Esther knew her self and her place within her own people. It was <u>that</u> position that triumphed. Her "salt" not only did <u>not</u> become insipid; it preserved her and her people.

The third use for salt, one that we may think of less often, is as a purifier. There are ritual uses for salt in this way across time and around the world. In Japan, for example, after attending a funeral, one might be given a packet of salt to throw in front of the door before entering one's house . . . to be cleansed from the funeral. Ezekiel 16.4 refers to a newborn being rubbed with salt as a cleansing ritual. In Roman Catholic practice, salt is added to water before it is blessed to be holy water.

It's in this capacity of salt as purifier that I read that somewhat mystifying statement "everyone will be salted with fire" (49). Fire, too, is a purifier, burning away impurities rather than precipitating them. It is that "salting with fie" which can increase commitment, strengthen faith. The early followers of Jesus were threatened and persecuted for their faith. Some, indeed, fell away. Others, however, found the opposition to be strengthening, for the community as well as for themselves.

It is this "strengthening of the community" that I see as the glue that binds these three properties of "salt" in our reading today. Certainly, as I mentioned, Mark's community was a persecuted minority. They needed the seasoning fo "salt" among themselves to encourage one another, to share their common lives. They needed the preservative quality of salt to keep their comment together in the face of opposition. And the purifying quality of salt helped them maintain their peculiar nature as member so or the Jesus movement.

These qualities are no less important for <u>our</u> community at Good Shepherd. We need to have "seasoning salt" within ourselves, enhancing our common life. This comes out in our concern for one another: sharing joys, and sorrows. We need to be concerned about our future: what do we as individuals bring as our "preservative salt" to ensure our sustained life down the road And we need to see the "purifying salt" of challenges <u>as</u> opportunities to bind ourselves even closer together as a committed community.

The image of "salt" that is <u>not</u> found in Mark, but in Matthew, is a sort of capstone and summary of what I've seen here. If we are successful at being salt among ourselves, we'll go a long way towards being the "salt of the earth" — a salt so desperately needed today!

Amen.