

“Prayer” (Colossians 4)

It is an ordinary, everyday item found in almost every one of our homes. Some of us stash the familiar blue canister away in cupboards while others leave it out in plain sight or still some others find the middle road choosing to keep theirs in a clever or crafty container on the counter. This combination of two elements from the periodic table has become so ubiquitous, that you need to go to great lengths to avoid it. It is everywhere, in almost everything, and yet this mundane part of our modern day life was in Paul’s time so precious used to preserve food, disinfect, fertilize the ground, and even in some early societies used as currency. Salt has been around for centuries, it transcends time and cultures, but now this once hard to find item is so pervasive that I think most of us have come to have a negative view of salt. Medically, we link it to high blood pressure. Socially, we utter clichés about someone pouring salt in our wound. And relationally, when we call a person ‘salty’, at least in my experience, it is not meant as a compliment.

And so, when Paul writes to the Colossians to let their speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, that image might jar us just a bit as this seems like a contradiction in qualities or at the very least like there is some real tension in trying to be both sincerely heartfelt and seasoned with salt at the same time. Let’s face it most of the ‘salty’ folks I’ve come across were not all that gracious. Now, if this was just an isolated reference to salt in scripture, we could just shrug Paul’s words off, shaking our heads at how words in the Bible sometimes get lost in translation and time. But the image of salt is sprinkled throughout the Bible, like my grandmother’s cooking with a pinch here and a dash there. Jesus encourages his disciples in Matthew to be salt for the earth; Elisha in his ministry to the people of Jericho who were grieving and broken takes a dash of salt and throws it into a nearby body of water and through that action says the people are redeemed and made new; and in at least three places in the Older Testament a writer will refer to God’s relationship with the Hebrew people as being ‘a covenant of salt’. Repetition is scripture’s way of saying pay attention. And so, in some ways we need to reconcile our negative views we might bring for this spice and recognize perhaps scripture has a different word of wisdom to offer.

We can start by realizing that the abundance of table salt in our world was not the reality of Paul’s world. And while we might be tempted to take the value, usefulness and preciousness of salt that Paul would have known when he used this metaphor and translate this illustration into an updated, more modern day image of something we hold onto as valuable and useful and incredibly precious, like let’s say an I-pad (you all thought I was going to say chocolate); I would encourage us though to not let go so quickly of the wisdom here. To be gracious and seasoned with salt still has something left to teach us about living as disciples in response to God’s presence. I don’t think it was happenstance that the writers in both testaments selected this image of salt. Spices have always added a zest to food, even enhances what is already there. In the same way spices and salt in particular, contributes and brings out hidden flavors we might not have tasted. Salt awakens something deeper that might otherwise be dormant or unknown. So, take this leap with me, what is adding zest to your faith right now? Where do you find a sort of spiritual saltiness, a place or a practice or an activity that is awakening new thoughts and new understandings, how are you being challenged to deepen your discipleship?

But friends, saltiness is not only about our internal lives. Paul throws salt on top of graciousness, mixes it up in a bowl, and serves it as a way for us to relate to each other. As

Midwesterners we have the gracious part down to a science. We know how to smile politely or be supportive or offer a hug at appropriate times; those abilities are added to the drinking water on a weekly basis. But this can also lead to a situation where we are not always as honest as we could be. We sympathetically nod our heads and look with kindness all the while our mind shouts out, “run, run away as fast as you can.” We’ve all been there; it is a cultural hazard of living here. And so, how do we, in our relationships with each other both inside the church and with co-workers and with neighbors and with all those who brush up against our life, practice a kind of salty graciousness?

The answer might be found in salt itself. You see if you pull the two elements of table salt apart you have sodium chloride, if my high school chemistry memory is at all intact. Now, sodium has this natural desire to combine with, attach itself onto something else and chlorine is that offensive smell in bleach. Pause for a moment, isn’t that amazing? The Creator takes one compound that will tolerate just about anything and attaches it to another compound that most of the other elements on the periodic table want nothing to do with. Friends, I believe that might have something to say to our faith. Circle back around and you can see that graciousness left to its own devices, like sodium, might rather attach itself onto a sort of ‘just be nice’ kind of status quo faith, which is not life changing. Saltiness, like chlorine, on its own can be so off-putting, even offensive, that it too is easily dismissed and thus not life giving. But, graciousness seasoned with layer of salt will not settle so easily, the two come together inviting us to take leaps we would never have considered with either element only on its own. Graciousness and saltiness challenge us, they might even pull us in opposite directions and refuse to yield an inch. Paul says something very similar in his letter to the Ephesians when he writes, “speak the truth in love”. Truth and saltiness; love and graciousness are mirror images, but when you pair up one with the other, together they push each other to the very brink and boundary of comfort. And out there near the edge is where I think we discover God in new and unexpected ways.

When truth and love sit down for dinner, when graciousness and saltiness come together at a church meeting we have to seek out another way, the two cannot be held together only by human efforts. And so if we seek to speak the truth in love or be graciously salty we will, out of necessity, turn toward the One who is our beginning and end; the One to whom all things are possible. In fact, I think, we have to pray ourselves into another way of being in order to reconcile truth and love or salt and graciousness.

Over the last few weeks, I’ve noticed more and more in my life how it is easy to be pulled in one direction or the other. I settle for saying something nice or nothing at all. Or I make a quick quip that I instantly wish I could take back. Lean too much toward graciousness and we can be frustrated that we are not being honest. Lean too much toward saltiness and I think our souls start to dry out. And, to be honest, too often we think we should be able to navigate between the two on our own; but self reliance is not Paul’s point. At the beginning of this passage, Paul asks for the Colossians to pray for him. He asks that they might pray he would be able to speak a word that reflects the mystery of Christ who was graciously salty and spoke lovingly a truth that still challenges and compels us. To speak a true, gracious, zesty, faithful, loving word about Christ, God made known and real in the flesh; and to speak clearly, I believe, is the heartfelt prayer of every preacher. When I stand up before you Sunday after Sunday, carefully uttering words that prayerfully leap from my lips and ride the fragile air waves toward your ears, begin to work their way through blessings and brokenness and ordinariness and life that each one of you carries, I know it is only by the grace of God that faith might stir around us or within us. Paul asks for prayers, welcomes prayers from people he may have never even

met since some question whether Paul really founded or ever traveled the Colossian church. Imagine inviting someone to hold you in prayer you did not know, people you'd never met.

As a community of faith seeking to share the truth in love and live a graciously salty life together I think that naturally calls us to hold each other in prayer and prayerfully listen to each other. As a community of faith seeking to share the truth in love and live a graciously salty life together offers us one way to wrap our minds around what it means to follow and steep ourselves in the mystery of Christ. The more we try to do this, the more our efforts will cause us to return time and time again to Christ's words and wisdom to clarify how salty graciousness looks and help correct our misunderstanding and missteps of being disciples today. The more we try to live between saltiness and graciousness, the more our souls will long to be open to and discover anew God's presence and graceful guidance. For it is in a graciously salty prayer-filled community that I believe we will discover the Way toward a life changing relationship with the living God. Can we keep trying and with the grace of God seek to become that kind of place for each other, for our community, for our world, for today and days to come?

Thanks be to God and with one salty, gracious, prayerful voice God's people said, Amen.