

Salt: A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, February 9, 2020

Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalm 112:1-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

I hope that some of you have experienced the glory that is *Salt Fat Acid Heat*,¹ the Netflix documentary series adapted from Samin Nosrat's cookbook of the same name. The show is visually stunning and evocative.

“In the four episodes spanning four different countries . . . scenes in which each audible slurp and swallow and refrain of ‘It’s so good!’ illustrate the full, rich pleasure the chef finds in eating good food”² grown simply, prepared with understanding and care.

Nosrat is never afraid to show genuine excitement or to share her delight with a food. She unapologetically engages all her senses. And, her love of the earth, and of ingredients, and of tradition, and of the preparers of food, and of the food itself is tangible and contagious.

Nosrat promises that whether you’ve never picked up a knife or you’re an accomplished chef, there are only four basic factors that determine how good your

¹ <https://www.saltfatacidheat.com>.

² Jenny G. Zhang, “‘Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat’ Changes the Rules for Who Gets to Eat on TV: the quiet radicalism of showing Samin Nosrat Eating with Gusto,” *Eater*, Oct. 24, 2018: <https://www.eater.com/2018/10/24/18014782/salt-fat-acid-heat-samin-nosrat-eating-cooking-food-tv-netflix>.

food will taste: salt, fat, acid, heat.³ If you understand how they work, you can make delicious food. It's that simple.

There are no real recipes; instead, there are principles and an invitation to use your senses, your own judgment. To own the process. To learn through doing. To taste and see. To delight.

Hers is a philosophy of simplicity that evokes a certain decadence; that highlights the ordinary while elevating it to something extraordinary.

In many ways, this was also Jesus' philosophy.

Jesus said, *you are the salt of the earth* (Matt. 5:13).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus uses ordinary things – the simple materials of everyday life – to speak to spiritual realities. Birds, weeds, flowers, seeds, sheep, coins, fruit trees, and, of course, wine and water, bread and vine.

I think that, for most of us, life – especially our life of faith - can seem mysterious and complex; full of truths that our words can't capture fully.

As a result, we complicate what might be rather simple, and attenuate what might be held close.

Jesus though, Jesus speaks the transcendent into simplicity, reminding us that the connection between the eternal and the transient is less attenuated than we like to

³ Samin Nosrat, "Salt Fat Acid Heat" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 5.

think; Jesus hands us the stuff of ordinary life, begs us hold it, turn it over, use it, remember it, know God in it.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls us salt. *You*, he says, *you are the salt of the earth*.

If your instinct is to look around to find who Jesus might be speaking to, then you're probably not alone. We all know "salt of the earth" people, and most of us don't put ourselves in that category. When we hear, "you are the salt of the earth," we distance ourselves, constructing a mental list of the virtues that seem to come naturally to such a person. We then look at our list, our recipe if you will, with the resignation of someone who knows they will never be a master chef. There is no delight; there is frustration, fatigue, resignation, dashed hopes, cynicism, shame.

But, Jesus does not say, "You will become the salt of the earth." Or, "That person over there, they are the salt of the earth." He says, "You are the salt of the earth."

What does it mean to be salt? Here are some things I've learned about salt from Nosrat.

All salt comes from the ocean, be it the Atlantic or a long-forgotten sea turned salt flat. Many of us, I'm sure, associate salt with the beach. I think of earthly things: hot summer days in the Florida Panhandle by the gulf. I think of seagulls and sunburns and mouthfuls of salty water and brushing dried salt off my skin at the end of a long afternoon. And, I think of things heavenly. I think of standing at the water's edge and noticing how limitless the world seemed, how small I was, how brutal life could be, and how beautiful.

Like salt, our origin story is Creation; when there was water and little else. We too depend on the waters of the earth for our existence, and each of us comes from the salty waters of a womb. Made in the image of God, we are somehow both vast and contained; heavenly and earthly.

Two, salt's primary role is to amplify flavor. While it affects texture and helps modify other flavors, its true vocation is to make our food sing. It enhances, deepens, unlocks already existing flavor. Quite simply, salt makes food taste more like itself.

Nosrat writes, "James Beard, the father of modern American cookery, once asked, 'Where would we be without salt?' I know the answer: adrift in a sea of blandness. If only one lesson from this book stays with you, let it be this: *Salt has a greater impact on flavor than any other ingredient.*"⁴

Like salt, the potential for our impact is great. The differences among us affect texture, offering the delight of variety. We are meant to make life sing! To enhance, deepen, and unlock the eternal Truths of God; to show others - and to remind ourselves - of a richer way of living and of being. A way truer to what was intended.

Three, salt is fundamentally relational. What I mean by that is this: by itself, it's fairly useless. Left in the salt shaker, it might serve as a nice table ornament (depending on the shaker; and, really, the thing might as well be empty). But, put into use, it brings its own flavor, its own texture, its own origin story, into partnership with something else; enhancing the flavor of that other ingredient, "minimizing bitterness, balancing out sweetness, and enhancing aromas,"⁵ –bringing it to life.

⁴ Nosrat, "Salt Fat Acid Heat," 21.

⁵ Ibid.

Like salt, we are meant for each other. The people of God are meant to live as community of faith, working in partnership towards something greater than we could be on our own; preserving rather than destroying, enhancing rather than overpowering, lifting up others, humbling ourselves, and pointing always to the Glory of God.

It is curious that we are hard-wired to crave salt. It's one of several dozen essential nutrients we need to survive. Because the human body can't store much salt, we need to consume it regularly so that we can carry out basic biological processes. We need it so desperately that we are hard-wired to crave it to ensure that we get enough of it. Our body is primed to cry out for what it needs.

Human beings crave not only salt; we crave connection with one another and with God. We crave a life of meaning; a life lived in communion with God's purpose for us. Our hearts were created this way - hungry - so that we might seek out what we truly need: the bread of life. If we fail to respond to that craving, we are like salt that has lost its taste. We are, simply put, living life blandly.

And, Jesus said, *you are the salt of the earth.*

We have been called - collectively - by name: Salt. Let us delight in that. Let us approach that call with curiosity, eager hearts, and a willingness to learn as we go. Let us allow our craving to guide us, being not resigned to failure, but empowered by the opportunity. Being not cynical, but joyful. Being not afraid, but willing.

Jesus highlights ordinary things, while elevating them to something extraordinary; that's you. And that's me. Together. *The salt of the earth*. Thanks be to God.