

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 8-9, 2020/ Cathedral of St. Paul  
Readings: Isaiah 58: 7-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

Since we're honest people, I suspect we would all admit that we each have particular bad habits. I am not speaking about moral failures, but of human habits that we would much prefer to discard. My bad habit was formed while reading the newspaper. I would immediately grab the sports section, regardless of what was going on in the world. It took me years to break free and understand that the front page is on front for a reason.

And equally bad habit occurs whenever I dine at a restaurant. As soon as the food arrives, I immediately reach for the salt. In truth, I don't even think about it. I suspect it many a server has wrongly inferred that I am putting down the great work of a chef. Yes, salt is added to enhance flavor, but it begs the question - what if it is not needed? I've been to restaurants only to discover that salt has removed from the table. "Sir, we recommend that you taste the food as cooked." Available upon request! I dine at those restaurants once! I get to make that call- not them!

In today's gospel, salt plays a prominent role. It doesn't sound like a spiritual topic at face value, but in reality it packs tremendous spiritual, theological, and historical value. In biblical times, salt land was unfruitful land, barren and empty. When a captured city was doomed to destruction, it was often sewn with salt in order to kill whatever vegetation remained. Salt was equally valuable as a food preservation agent. It enhanced the flavor of food, and more importantly it preserved it.

But what happens when the salt lost flavor? When salt was exposed to rain, excessive sun, or stored in damp places, it did indeed lose its flavor. It was utterly useless. Here, we are not talking about pure sodium chloride, a stable chemical compound. Rather, we refer to the complex mixed salt that was found in biblical lands. We have little experience with salt losing its flavor when it is stored in re-sealable cans in our cupboard.

Consider the Dead Sea, a glaring example of salt that had lost its flavor. If you took one gallon of water from the Dead Sea and let it sit until the water evaporated, you would be left with over one pound of it. And it would be utterly flavorless.<sup>1</sup>

There are times in our lives when the flame of spirituality seems to flicker or even go out. These are the times that we must persevere in our faith. How will our spiritual life keep its flavor if we begin to absent ourselves from the Eucharist on a regular basis? Is it reasonable to expect much of a return for that type of investment?

It is the logic of the world that states that a well-lived life is one free from suffering or struggle. I ask you – where were you ever find such a promise by God in the Scriptures? It is simply not there. We are responsible agents of our own happiness and this happiness is not defined as an absence of difficulty, effort or struggle. Has our spiritual life lost flavor, lost its taste?

This could happen after the death of a loved one, in the aftermath of workplace difficulties, in a broken relationship, and struggles in school. It could be many things. Our peace is only found in knowing that we are following the will of God in our lives. That is the source of our peace.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rock salt is the mineral form of sodium chloride and was formed when salty waters dried out, resulting in layers of salt which vary in purity, from pure sodium chloride in clear crystal form, to that which is mixed with soil and plant material. Now this seems more akin to the words of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> There is the story of the Chinese philosopher who lived about 350 BC and was a notable proponent of the teachings of Confucius. He attributed much of his wisdom to the upbringing at the hands of his mother. "When Mencius was young, after finishing his studies he returned home. At that moment, Mencius' mother was weaving. She asked him, saying, 'How far did you get in your studies today?' Mencius replied, 'About the same as usual.' Mencius' mother then took up her knife and cut the cloth she was weaving. Mencius became alarmed and asked her to explain her actions. She said, 'Your neglecting your studies is like my cutting the cloth I wove...If a woman who abandons her livelihood and a man who neglects cultivating his virtue do not become burglars or thieves, then they will end their days as slaves.'" Mencius was frightened by his mother's words. Day and night he studied tirelessly. He then studied with the great master Zisi until he became one of the leading scholars of his generation. "Mencius and his Mother: A Lesson Drawn from Weaving," [Literary Excerpt and Illustration]," in *Children and Youth in History*.

As difficult as it may be to admit, in life we are either progressing or moving backwards. The only impossibility is to remain the same. It is a reality with which we must deal; but it ought not to paralyze us.

We are invited to cultivate virtue by means of hard work, perseverance, and study. Our faith deserves that effort on our part, and we will be rewarded for it. Jesus is urging us to let our lights shine and not to hide them under a bushel basket.

We have to get on with the hard work of discipleship. Quit worrying about the past, for the past will never come to pass again. The future has yet to be lived, so we are to make up our minds and hearts not to live the future without Christ at our side.