Jesus uses two images in today's Gospel. He calls his followers to be light for the world and the salt of the earth. We're familiar with the contrast of light and darkness. We might not be quite as familiar with the image of salt. It's part of our everyday life. It has a place on every table. Some of us use too much, others avoid it for health reasons, most of us never give it much thought.

Anyone living in cold climates in this month of February knows the blessing and curse of the salt that melts the snow and ice, but at the same time leaves a thin, white film over cars and roads and shoes. If it's not washed off, the salt can even become corrosive.

Yet, in today's Gospel, Jesus uses the phrase “salt of the earth” to refer to his followers. In his day, salt was essential not only for seasoning, but also for preserving meats, fish, and other foods. Presumably Jesus's disciples, several of whom were fishermen, would have been familiar with this use of salt. Salted meats would have to be reconstituted with water before they could be used. Too much salt rendered them inedible. Not enough would allow them to spoil.

Jesus warns his followers that if salt loses its flavor, it is worthless. One of the things Scripture scholars tell us about this passage is that while salt can't lose its “saltiness,” it can become so diluted by impurities that it can no longer be used.

We've all known times when we become so overwhelmed by the day-to-day grind of our lives that life itself seems to lose its savor. Not only can we not be salt and light for others, we can't even find anything in our own lives to perk us up. It is perhaps at these times that Jesus's words strike a chord deep within us.

All of these things make salt a rich metaphor for our lives as followers of Jesus. We can think about how our faith adds spice and flavor to our lives and the lives of those around us. And we know that when we let our spiritual lives get diluted and contaminated by too many other things that we lose touch with the faith that saves us.

But we also know that if we become overbearing in our insistence on other people doing things our way — even if we're convinced that our way is God's way — it's likely that we will turn people away from a path they might otherwise have followed. That kind of religious browbeating can become corrosive. We need to let the living water of Jesus's example temper us.

Salt is a chemical compound, and one of the characteristics of such compounds is the way it interacts with everything with which it comes into contact. If we are indeed to be the salt of the earth, we need to be aware of how we're interacting with others. We need to be sure that we're bringing the flavor of the Gospel to others. Jesus calls us to walk in his footsteps, to treat others the way he treated them. We might need to have a little lighter hand with the salt shaker.

Like salting our food, living our faith allows for a range of differences. If we find ourselves in a peak moment when we hear Jesus's words, they will be a clarion call to bring his presence to the world. But if we're feeling less than bright and salty, we need to find ways to return to the source of our faith. We might need to get rid of some distractions and bring some new seasoning to our faith lives.

A Light Touch with the Salt Shaker

By Diane M. Houdek

SUNDAY READINGS

Isaiah 58:7-10
A prophet provides the people with a sure formula for success. Its main ingredient is sincere religion.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Paul tells us that he did not use fancy words when he preached. He depended on the Spirit and the Spirit's powerful presence to transmit the message of Christ crucified.

Matthew 5:13-16
Jesus proclaims that his followers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.
The prophet Isaiah offers us crystal clear instructions for living the Gospel life. In our affluent society, few among us can claim to lack the necessities of life—food, clothing, shelter. God’s repeated requests that we share what we have with those less fortunate should not seem like one more demand on our few resources.

And it is not just for the benefit of the hungry that we’re asked to share—it’s for our own as well. We can more easily rejoice in our own simple possessions when we know that we are not enjoying excess while others suffer want. What God asks of us is what’s best for all.

This was the foundation of St. Francis’s understanding of what it meant to live the Gospel. By giving up the luxuries that were taken for granted by his family and peers, and by sharing all that he had left with the poor, he was free to focus all of his attention on God’s presence and action in his life.

Francis knew that this wouldn’t be easy for his followers. It’s OK if we struggle today to live this ideal, but we need to keep it shining before us like a beacon, always guiding us in the way that we need to travel.

When I was a little girl, my tiny bedroom featured a book-laden bedside table and a lamp I loved. It looked like a ballerina with a flowing gown and matching lampshade/headress.

After giving my room an especially good tidying one night, I altered the ambiance by topping the lamp with an old sailor’s hat—giving everything just the right glow. By the time I persuaded my mother to admire my handiwork, the hat was on fire and the plastic lampshade was melting down the sides of the fixture.

This episode always comes to mind when reading Jesus’s warning not to hide our lights. It’s not just a caution about dimming the light the world so needs, but about the danger in hiding something as explosive as the Gospel.

The Good News is meant to change our lives and the world; if we don’t share it, the world loses a great gift and we face a grave danger.

Lord, we know all things begin with your inspiration. Your prophets have set before us a worthy challenge: share bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, silence malicious speech. We call on you to strengthen our efforts and recognize in them our goodwill. Amen.