

Salty Insistence

Matthew 5:13

What did Jesus mean by this metaphor to be salt? I think we come to this text with a history of lessons that we've learned. It is true that salt enhances flavor. Salt preserves food, which would seem even more important in times before refrigeration.

But the wry rabbi did not say be like salt in food. "You are the salt of *the earth*." To our ears, this phrase refers to a person of humility, kindness, and perhaps simplicity.

But to the ancient world, salt of the earth meant a tactic of war. Salt was sown in the soil to prevent crops from growing. Moreover, in the first century, salt was so rare that Roman soldiers were actually paid in salt. This idea actually survives to our time as the lexical root for "salt" is the same as "salary." While 2,000 years later, our culture has domesticated the metaphor to the kitchen table, "salt of the earth," which would have sounded combative to Jesus' original audience.

No Bible verse should be taken from its context, and Jesus's teachings should be interpreted in light of the life that he lived. To be clear, Jesus advocated peaceful nonviolence—yet he insisted on truth and action. He asked, "If salt has lost its saltiness, what good is it?" In other words, if people of good faith are not standing up and speaking out, then what are we doing?

There was yet another school shooting last week and the same frustrating political responses. It is despairing to think that nothing will be done differently. Certain politicians even call this violence "facts of life."

Let's take a look at some facts: last week's killing in Georgia was the 23rd fatal instance of gun violence on a school campus this calendar year; since 2018, there have been 209 fatal school shootings.¹ No other nation on Earth is anywhere close to those numbers. School shootings are not a fact of life in general but a fact of American life in specific. We must act with conviction, not throw our hands up with cynicism.

I am aware that every time I point a finger, there are three fingers pointing back at me. It's worth pointing out that Jesus did not preach to the politicians of his day. His Sermon on the Mount was addressed to his followers (see Matthew 5-6). His words still challenge us to make a difference. Gun violence in schools is heavy on my heart, but we need not limit our thinking to any one issue. If people of good faith are not standing up and speaking out, we have lost our saltiness.

¹ I found these facts at Education Week: [School Shootings This Year: How Many and Where \(edweek.org\)](https://www.edweek.org/schools/news/2019/04/school-shootings-this-year-how-many-and-where)

Put positively, I've come to hear the command to be salt as a similar call to action by the words attributed to Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Interestingly, Gandhi had a history with salt. He led the famous Salt Marches in the 1930s to protest British imperial rule. Gandhi's principles of non-violent protest and civil disobedience were called *satyagraha*, which he loosely translated as "truth insistence." Insist on truth. Be the change. Be salt. I am far from the only preacher to see a reflection of Christ's teachings in this Hindu leader. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi showed us it could work."

I've already suggested a reason why we are tempted to lose our saltiness. It seems difficult to make a change. Leaders trot out the same platitudes, and the media cycle moves on until the next tragedy.

Yet, creating the change we wish to see in the world often takes time. It took years of protesting and marching to pass the Civil Rights legislation. India was not granted independence until almost 17 years after Gandhi began his Salt March. We have to keep trying and keep working, trusting that a pinch of salt here and a dash of salt there can eventually flavor the whole.

I turn my thoughts to the 9-11 terrorist attack that we will remember in the coming week. Tragically, the legacy of truth insistence in the years that have followed has rarely been nonviolent. That doesn't mean, however, that we are not still called to stand up and speak out. Be the change we wish to see in the world.

A few ways, then, that we might make 9-11 salty. Insist to neighbors, friends, and armchair experts in your life that Islam is a religion of peace and that violence in its name, whether the hijacking of planes or kidnapping of hostages, is a perversion of the faith.

Insist and make a point to thank a police officer, firefighter, nurse, doctor, or EMT. Thank someone who embodies the holy teaching found across religions that the greatest of what makes us human is that we run headlong into trouble to help, not away from it.

Finally, my mentor and friend, the late Brian Doyle, reminded me that on that heinous day, eight children were murdered while sitting on airplane with their loved ones. We could do a lot worse on this weighty day of the year than make a special effort to attend to children, play with them, laugh with them, and appreciate that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This might inspire us to insist in word and deed that our country protect, educate, and assist children all year long.

I want to leave you with this idea: Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." Not you will be salt if you do these things – you are! We are! God gives us the grace to act and be the change we wish to see in the world. So, if you seem to despair, remember that a little salt

can go a long way. A pinch here, a dash there, a person standing up, a church speaking out, and, by grace, things change. May it be so.

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September 8, 2024