

When we lose our saltiness Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A (Matthew 5:13-20)

We can lose that which feels most dear and essential to us: our health, a job, a relationship.

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The Gospel reading from Matthew poses what seems like an impossibility: "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" But the thing is, we do lose our saltiness. We can lose that which feels most dear and essential to us, that which makes us *us*: our health, a job, a relationship.

My most recent loss of saltiness was exceptionally low grade and had to do with becoming a parent. One summer in the late 90s I travelled with a couple thousand of my closest Lutheran friends to descend upon New Orleans for a youth gathering. During an afternoon free period, our congregation's chaperones let us loose in a small segment of the French Quarter to buy donuts and T-shirts and Cajun seasoning in cans shaped like crawfish.

Wandering around we happened upon a psychic studio. For less than \$10 we could find out our fortunes. This was a far more interesting investment than paprika in a crawfish can.

I was neither the first girl to go in nor the last. I do not remember much about the room except that it had appallingly poor lighting. The wizened psychic lady sat across a small table from me and took my hands. She looked at my hands silently and then said, "You will travel widely. You will be a good mother." Then she patted

my hands twice. “Just keep your weight down and your strength up.” As we stood she added ominously, “Don’t tell anyone about this fortune, or it won’t come true.”

She had seen into my soul. I hadn't even known I wanted to travel widely and hadn't really considered motherhood at all, much less my quality of motherhood. But when I heard that fortune told, it was like something I'd been thirsty for but didn't realize. I didn't know I was scared that I'd never go far from home or not have a child or be a poor parent if I did have a child. But now I knew. I would travel. I would be a good mother.

As we stumbled back out into the oppressive Louisiana summer heat and light, presumably tittering, another girl asked me quietly, “Did she tell you that you'd travel and be a good mother, too?”

No! The travel-and-good-mother line was the default Cajun psychic line for teenage girls in tie-dyed Lutheran shirts. She didn't see anything unique in me. Lutheran teenage girls drunk on 75 minutes of freedom in the French Quarter want more of the sweet elixir of travel and excitement. And maybe the odds were very good that in the past week before coming to New Orleans they'd had a fight with their mothers. She was a good social psychologist and demographer.

In the decades since, her words have come back to me. Sometimes, when I'm waiting out a delayed flight by perusing overpriced bags of snacks, bored and antsy, I will remember “You will travel widely...” and smile to myself.

The mother piece, though, as my husband and I considered starting a family, remained an unrealized promise. Did I want children? Yes. Had I always wanted children? No. I was never enamored with baby dolls. I detested babysitting. But ever since a crank in the French Quarter with a stunning dollar-per-minute scam saw into my soul, yes: I wanted to be a mother and a good one.

I can imagine a good life without children, just like before I met my husband I could imagine a good life single. I adore his company and our life together. Trying to have a baby has been clarifying, though. What began as “OK, let's try this! We'll never be fully ready!” became something else, over the months of monitoring bodily fluids and making clandestine conjugal visits in airport hotels when one or the other of us had to be with a client during hot zone... Yes, we wanted to be parents together. It just hadn't happened. The answer revealed itself in the effort, not the outcome.

Danielle Tumminio Hansen, in her beautiful book *Conceiving Family: A Practical Theology of Surrogacy and Self*, writes about how the experience of infertility and assisted reproduction offers the chance to be in mature friendship with God, but only when we allow ourselves to be. When prospective parents “believe that God can only redeem their experiences by forming them as biologically-grounded parents,” she writes, “they miss an opportunity to cultivate a relationship with God, rooted in friendship, that offers creative possibilities for meaning-making and subsequent healing.”

I wish we did more to make room for the totality of our experiences in how we talk about our relationships with God—when we’re full of salt and light and when we’re questioning and wandering.