

Being salt

When I got into cooking, it changed the way I understand Jesus' statement, "You are the salt of the earth."

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Lilli Carré)

In my late 30s I began to be the primary cook for our family. It started with a few simple recipes, slowly adapting them to our tastes and experimenting with different ingredients. Somewhere in the process, I became my mother, throwing in dashes of salt until it smelled or tasted right. I learned quickly how too much or too little changed what we experienced when we ate. Cooking began a new relationship to food, an attentiveness to what got eaten quickly and what was left cold and untouched. It made me appreciate, enjoy, and attend to all the food I ate in a new way.

It's not unlike appreciating an artist's painting even more after I pull out some old acrylics and try to replicate something I saw in a museum. The process of creation connects me to the materials of this world in ways that open up meaning.

This experience of the world also changes how we read and see one another—and, I think, the way we read scripture. Cooking made me attentive to scripture in a different way. I was reading through the Sermon on the Mount recently and found myself lingering over Jesus' exhortation that we are salt (Matt. 5:13). Growing up I always heard it, in a strange slight of sound, as "be salt." And so much of my life in my early Christian years was spent trying to follow this command. I did my best, but I could never quite be the preservation of the world this call seemed to require of me.

But there was something about reading this passage recently as someone who cooks, who uses salt everyday. Yes, salt preserves. It also enhances the flavors around it. It can also easily turn a meal brackish and overwhelming. And for anyone who has eaten a salted chip after biting their tongue knows, salt does not feel good on an open wound—it stings even as it cleanses. Something about using salt in the kitchen every day made me realize a misreading I had been carrying for so long. Jesus names something about our identity ("you are salt"), but I heard instead a command to be followed ("be salt").

It's such a strange thing to flip a word and see the action of your life take on a different character. *Are* and *be* can be two very different ways of walking through the world. I'm not sure the granules of kosher salt I throw into my stew can really be anything other than what they are. In my reading "be salt," I had inserted the possibility that I wasn't already salt, or that somehow part of my discipleship involved endeavoring to preserve something in this world for God. But this mineral

does its work in our meals, in our bodies, and in our world simply by existing.

This makes Jesus' warning not to lose our saltiness all the more strange. How can salt lose its saltiness? Perhaps from some sort of impurity that was already present, which means it wasn't just salt to begin with, or that the salt was exposed to moisture at some point and evaporated. Now, we could read this as, *Be pure! Do not expose yourself to the world, lest you become less than salt and need to be thrown out.* But Jesus does not say, *You are salt in a jar, never open it lest you become less salty.* He does not say, *You are impure, therefore you are going to be thrown out no matter what you do.*

No, he just says that we are salt. I wonder if Jesus is playing with the impossibility of salt losing its saltiness. You cannot not be salt. It is who you are. But you could forget who you are. You could refuse the way you have been formed and knit together in this peculiar and incredible way that has a way of bringing out the flavor in those around you. You could forget that there is something about you that might preserve the lives of those you are bound to. You could forget that this element is infused in the entirety of your body, and even when it's lost through your tears or your exertion, it returns in eating and drinking, in the sustenance of our daily lives together.

Too often there is a kind of shutting off the cycle of our reading and living. Reading scripture through lenses of doctrine or ideology, words get shifted and mantras slowly form and take on lives of their own. But something interesting often happens when we read and live and live and read, our daily lives and activities becoming mediums that help us to see scripture in new ways and, in turn, help us to see our daily lives and our world with more texture, to taste the world more completely.

Creating with my hands, being connected to what I eat, helped me to find a truer meaning in Jesus' words. I do not need to be anything other than what I am. We are salt. When we are who God made us to be, we bring out the uniqueness of those around us, our presence might slow decay, we might even cleanse a wound, our presence might be a truth that brings a little pain, and in all of it there is life. In a world where it feels like only power and violence are winning, maybe this reminder that we are salt is more revolutionary than we think.