

In a surprising turn of events, this week my teenage daughters were able to teach me something my seminary professors were never able to. And it has to do with today's Gospel lesson.

See, I've always loved this passage, and particularly the part about salt. I like it for two reasons, I guess. Number one, I happen to be a big fan of salt...ask my friends. But maybe more importantly, I think it's just such a strong and fascinating image. It's a funny question: "If salt has lost its saltiness how can you season it?"

I think it's a vivid image because salt is a vivid flavor. When you hear the word "Salt" you know exactly what that tastes like, right? What it feels like in your mouth. But at the same time, it is difficult to describe. How do you explain what salt tastes like?

So I once asked a seminary professor about this verse and he said something that professors love to say and students hate to hear. He said, "I have no idea what that means. It doesn't make sense." Thanks a lot.

But here's where my teenagers come in. See, if you currently have young people in your life, you might know that the term "salty" has entered the teenage lingo.

Salty. It means, basically, to be a little riled up. Not grumpy, but more like, vindicated. I'd say sassy but that sort of diminishes it. You might be salty if someone has wronged you or offended you, and you know and you are ready to put up a little bit of a fight. Not mad, just...salty. I'm sure my girls will say I didn't explain it quite right, because, like the flavor of salt, I can't really describe it...but I know it when I experience it.

And actually, I'd say Jesus is pretty salty in this text – in the modern sense.

See, here we find the disciples coming like a bunch of tattle-tales to complain that some people – some *outsiders* – are doing their work. How dare they! They are healing and casting out demons in the name of Jesus even though they don't have a special Disciple badge. Jesus followers can hardly believe it when they witness this. And instead of celebrating the miracle of healing they see, they want Jesus to shut that down.

But Jesus tells them: No. It doesn't matter what label those people have. It doesn't matter that they aren't "one of us." It's the good work that matters. Not the rules. Not the boundaries. But the good, healing work being done in his name.

And Jesus doesn't just end there. Instead, he scolds the disciples with some pretty harsh language about fire and hell. He tells them that it is actually *their* behavior – their judgment and exclusion - that is hurting God's children. And they'd better cut that behavior out of their lives right now if they are going to call themselves followers of

Jesus. You see, he explains, salt is good; but if it loses its saltiness...then what's the point?

Here's where my seminary professor was right. It *doesn't* make sense. Salt *can't* lose its saltiness. So if a bottle is labeled "Salt" but it doesn't taste like salt – then it isn't salt.

In other words, if you're going to label yourself a follower of Jesus but then go around excluding and judging people, and building walls around God's kingdom, then you aren't really following Jesus, after all.

Jesus calls them out on their hypocrisy. And he doesn't do it sweetly.

And as much as I'd love to gloss over a whole section of this reading today, I think we have to hear it. These are important words for us today, too, and for the Church. Because we can get pretty self-righteous about our traditions and rules and norms. And sometimes we, too, refuse to be to listen to be changed by new ideas and new voices. And Jesus challenges us, with talk of fire and judgment.

And that's hard to hear. We don't like the image of a judgmental God. We can easily hear this as frightening and punishing – conjuring up all kinds of memories and images of violence or meanness. But that's not the kind of judgement God has for us. No, God simply wants us to be who God has created and called us to be. Jesus is frustrated with the disciples, yes, but only because he knows that it's possible for them – for us – to grow. Maybe even, to learn from the outsiders.

See, this isn't about eternal punishment here – it's about daily confession, forgiveness, and conversion.

When we humble ourselves and take note of the outsiders and the child and the victim, we might just be re-formed. Learn from these little ones, Jesus says. It doesn't matter if they are wearing the wrong team's jersey. It's the act of healing and preserving life that matters.

And here's where we get back to salt. Because that's what salt does, after all. Salt has properties that heal, properties that preserve life. Salt brings out the best flavors in all the things around it – it doesn't need to be the star of the show (In fact, it's gross when it is.)

Those little ones – those outsiders – were being true salt in the world, putting to shame the proud and the powerful.

But don't worry. All is not lost for the hypocrites. Because God has chosen us to be God's little children, knowing full well that we would sometimes mess it up. We aren't

baptized and called children of God *after* we prove we'll follow Jesus perfectly. No, we are loved and claimed and made God's children, even while we are still sinners.

And so God *will* use us...in spite of us...to bring healing and life to the world. And every day we'll mess it up. And every day we'll be forgiven and made new again. And every day we can try again to be just a little bit better.

Salt *can't* lose its saltiness. We *are* children of God, and we can't get rid of that label that God has given us.

Sure, some days, we won't look or sound or think like followers of Jesus. If being a "good Christian" was something we had to sign up for, I'm not sure most of us would do that. If we did, I'm not sure we'd qualify.

The story from Numbers that we heard today gives us a great example to leave with.

In this scene, Moses is burned out. And he complains to God about the hard work of leading his whiny people. And he asks God for help. So of course, God answers. And at God's direction, Moses calls a meeting. And 70 elders mark their Count Me In forms and turn up for the training session, and God gives those 70 the ability to prophesy – the help Moses out.

But did you notice these two other guys? Eldad and Medad. They *didn't* volunteer. They weren't at the meeting! And guess what? God uses them, too. God's Spirit rests on them just like it rested on those gathered in the tent, and just like it rests on each of us. With God's help, we have all we need to be salt in the world. To heal, and to preserve life, and to bring out the beautiful, unique flavor of all those around us.

Because you see, in a surprising turn of events, God's power is always found in the least likely places: A barn in Bethlehem. A cross. An outsider. And yes, even in you. Amen.