

## **The salt of the earth**

Matthew 5:13-16

February 6, 2011

I started a new book this week, but I almost didn't make it to the first page!

Just before the first page of the first chapter, the author included a page with two brief quotations. I got stuck on the second of the quotations, a short aphorism from a French writer I've never heard of, Charles Peguy:

*Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint.*

Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint. That stopped me in my tracks. Of all of life's losses, of all of life's failures, of all of life's disappointments, of all of life's tragedies, in the end, only one matters: not to have been a saint.

Yes! The words struck a chord with me. Yes! This is what we are made for, to be saints, and to miss that, to live our lives mired in mundane and frivolous and self-serving and unimportant endeavors is the greatest of tragedies!

We are made to be more! We are made to live profound and useful and love-rich lives! What a loss it would be to live our whole lives only to be able to say at the end, "I served myself."

This is our calling, to be saints, to put what we've been given to good use, to have eyes and hearts and hands open to serve each other. This is the thing, the only thing, that makes a life worth living. Success and wealth and accomplishment and happiness: these things are fickle, unpredictable and unevenly distributed among us, but being a saint -- that is possible for any of us. That is possible for all of us. This is our basic human calling. This is the highest human achievement.

That was my first reaction after reading the quotation, but it has taken me much longer to tell you about that first emotional response than to have it! Almost immediately, I had a second reaction. No! This is wholly unfair. No!

Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint? Why cast a shadow of unworthiness over the host of ordinary lives we lead? There are countless lives lived, by many of us certainly, lives lived small and close to home, checkered lives full of ups and downs, good and bad, successes and failures, but lives lived out of a sense of duty and responsibility, lives lived with some sense of care and carefulness. Would we want to call such a life -- working hard to make ends meet, doing your best to provide for a family, acting

with kindness now and again when the occasion calls for it, seeking a little happiness for yourself and for those you love -- would we want to call such a life a tragedy? Just because it falls somewhat short of sainthood? What about grace? What about Jesus' affirmation of the worthiness of every human life?

All these thoughts ran through my mind and my heart very quickly, but I still couldn't get past that line ...

*Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint.*

But finally, I made peace with it. At least I think I have! Finally, I understood that it is precisely in the midst of what is ordinary, in the midst of our everyday tasks and everyday challenges and everyday relationships that you and I may live as saints. Being a saint is not about climbing up, rising above, the ordinariness of our lives. Being a saint is about bringing Jesus down, bringing Jesus in, to the ordinariness of our lives. Being a saint is living by grace, living in grace, where, wherever, however, you already are.

The tragedy is not to let Jesus in! The tragedy is not to let Jesus' light, Jesus' comfort and wisdom and gentleness and forgiveness and compassion bathe you and fill you and reshape you, right where you are, right as you are.

Each life may be a saintly life. Each life is a saintly life. We simply need to grasp it as it is and live it as it is in the light of Christ. We are what God has made us to be, and, with Jesus' help, with Jesus' presence in us and among us, we will be able to live the lives God has made us to live. We are saints. We are salt and light. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world.

It's a wonderful image, the image Jesus uses to tell the crowds gathered around him -- and us -- what we are. You are the salt of the earth!

What does salt do? What is salt good for?

- *Soak fish in salt water before descaling; the scales will come off easier.*
- *Add salt to green salads to prevent wilting.*
- *Soak wrinkled apples in a mildly salted water solution to perk them up.*
- *Rub salt on your pancake griddle and your pancakes won't stick.*
- *Soak toothbrushes in salt water before you first use them and they will last longer.*
- *Boil clothespins in salt water before using them and they will last longer.*
- *Add a little salt to the water and your cut flowers will last longer.*
- *A dash of salt enhances the taste of tea or coffee.*
- *Milk stays fresh longer when a little salt is added.*
- *Salt and lemon juice removes mildew.*

Those are just a few of the examples I found on a website listing sixty different uses for table salt!

What does salt do? What is salt good for?

We put salt on icy roads and sidewalks to melt the ice and snow, to give us better traction and prevent accident and injury.

We add salt in fertilizer to our fields and gardens to provide essential nutrients and to help plants grow stronger and healthier.

We add salt to cooking recipes or directly to our food to enhance the flavor, to make it taste better.

Do you see a pattern? Salt doesn't replace the things that are essential to our health and enjoyment. Salt just makes these things better! We don't eat salt plain -- it would do us little good and probably a lot of harm if we did. And we don't fertilize our plants with straight salt -- they would burn. We add salt to what is there to make it taste better and grow stronger and last longer.

To make it last longer. One of the primary uses for salt in Jesus' day was as a preservative, to prevent spoilage. Without refrigeration, the only way to keep meats for any length of time was by salting or drying. Salt cannot replace the nutritional value of the meat, but it can keep the meat from losing its value.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." You are like salt, not meant to be taken straight, not meant to be kept above and apart from everything else and everybody else, but meant to be sprinkled, scattered, among everything else and everybody else. You are added to whatever is there where you are to make it better! Without salt, without you, life would be bland, uninteresting, weak, more difficult, and without salt, without you, it's all going to end up spoiled. The earth without salt wouldn't be the earth!

You are salt. You are light. Be what you are!

Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to be what you are. Not to be the salt you were made to be -- enhancing, empowering, preserving, protecting, helping other people live better, helping other people be better. Not to be the light you were made to be -- illuminating, guiding, warming, encouraging, helping other people see what is there, the beauty and the ugliness, so they may appreciate the beauty and, with God's help, transform the ugliness.

Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint. So what do you think about that statement?