

NEEDS MORE SALT

In my years of ministry I've made a lot of visits to elderly folks. Kind, sweet, considerate elderly folks. They tell me not to worry about tracking dirt into their immaculately cleaned house, even though I do worry. So I take my shoes off anyway.

Then they say, "Would you like a cup of coffee? I just made some," even though I don't really like coffee. But I'll have a cup anyway (black please, and no sugar), because it was so considerate of them to make a fresh pot for me to enjoy during my visit.

They will offer me cookies or doughnuts or some other treat, even though I had only just finished eating breakfast or lunch an hour ago and I'm not hungry. Sometimes I'll take one or two (or more!) and nibble on them while we talk.

That's my favorite part of visiting people. The talking. The conversation. The sharing of recent events and cherished life stories and surprising incidents that I never would have imagined happened in their lives.

And during almost every visit to those sweet, considerate elderly folks, the discussion inevitably turns to health. And often it's not-so-good health. The sickness they had just gotten over; the surgery they'd recently had and were slowly recovering from; the injury they sustained from slipping on a patch of ice in their walkway and falling.

Betty Davis once said, or at least the quote was attributed to her, that "Old age ain't for sissies." Now that I've recently turned sixty, I'm beginning to understand what she meant. When I was a lot younger than I am now, I used to wonder why elderly people talked about their health all the time: the aches and pains they suffered, the massive amount of pills they were taking every day, the constant trips to the doctor's office they had to go to. Didn't they have something—anything—else to converse about?

But now I better understand how constantly escalating health issues become the most noteworthy events of a person's life as they grow older; and thus, health issues become the main subject of almost every conversation they have. Especially when that conversation is with their pastor.

I better understand now how life changes as one gets up in years. Things that once were a piece of cake to accomplish become major hurdles that are a

real struggle to get done. Bones creak, muscles ache, the ability to remember weakens, strength lessens, and health and wellbeing grows more fragile. And psychologically, self-esteem takes a hit. As people grow older, they can't accomplish as much, so they don't feel as confident. They feel less valued. And they can feel like they're becoming a burden to their children and to society.

Then those same wonderful elderly people sit in church—just like you're doing today—and the Scripture reading for the worship service is the one where Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt loses its saltiness, its taste, its flavor, its savoryness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

I know, from some of the talks I've had, that many elderly people feel like that. They feel they're like salt that has lost its saltiness and is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out.

I had a conversation recently with an elderly man who felt he had no good reason to live anymore. In his mind, he couldn't do anything productive. His wife had passed away and he missed her terribly. "Why should I go on living?" he asked me; but I'm pretty certain he was really asking himself. In his mind his life had lost his savoryness, so his attitude was, "I'm no good, just throw me out."

He forgot—as have lots of other people—that Jesus called him "the salt of the earth." That's a pretty important designation. And I don't believe people lose their saltiness when they grow older. I think they just need to find new ways to flavor other people's lives.

I came across a story a few weeks ago that I want to share with you now. I think it fits in perfectly with my message this morning. It was written by a woman named Marilyn Carlson Webber.

"Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?" It was my friend Bardy on the phone. "I need your help. I'll be by to pick you up in my car."

"Where are we going?" I asked. "What should I wear?"

"It really doesn't matter. You'll see. Or maybe I should say, I'll see." Her infectious laughter crackled across the telephone lines, then the dial tone alerted me that she assumed I was willing to accompany her on some secret mission. If my hunch was correct, she was probably already out the door, in her car, and headed in my direction.

But for what? I had learned not to try to second-guess my friend. Bardy is the most interesting person I know—and the most unpredictable. She had always wanted to be a registered nurse, so she went back to school and became one when she was 63 years old. "The real fun started when I graduated," Bardy had informed me. "When I applied for jobs, I was told, "We retire people at your age,

Mrs. Bardarson, we don't hire them!"

Disappointed but not discouraged, Bardy told God that if he didn't want her sidelined, he'd have to help her find her niche. She continued to apply for nursing positions and was finally hired by a retirement home. She was an instant hit with the residents. When they talked with her about their aches and pains, they found a sympathetic ear. After all, she had many of those aches and pains herself. They could tell she loved her work and that she was genuinely concerned for them. When she did retire at age 70, the residents gave her the biggest party in the history of the retirement home.

Soon Bardy was at my front door. "I'm driving today," she announced. "Jump in the passenger's seat."

"Where are we going?" I asked as I locked the front door of my house.

"It doesn't matter," she replied with a big Cheshire grin on her face. Then Bardy looked at me. "Marilynn, you know I had to retire from nursing when it became too much for me to lift the patients. Now I've found a new job. I'm going to travel with blind tourists. I'll get to go to all the places I've wanted to see. Plus, I'll be helping others, and I'll even get paid for it! Now I need you to help me prepare. Close your eyes while I drive."

I complied.

"Are your eyes closed? Good!" Bardy said. "I have to practice." She began to describe the scenery of the Seattle streets as she would for a blind tourist. From time to time she would interrupt herself and ask me, "Could you picture that? Was I clear? Did I make sense? Do I sound condescending?"

That day I saw Seattle in a new way. And I learned one of Bardy's secrets, as well. What makes her such an interesting person is her determination to wear out, not rust out."

That wonderful story illustrates to me a sad and unfortunate fact. When we grow older, sometimes we're the ones who remove the saltiness out of ourselves. We put ourselves on the shelf and wait for the expiration date to pass. Not everyone, of course. There are many young at heart people here in our congregation who have plenty of saltiness left, and they'll never allow anyone to throw them out and trample them underfoot. It's not going to happen. They would rather wear out than rust out. And God bless them for that. Because right now this faith community depends heavily on the saltiness of such older people—many of whom (and I'm not ashamed to say this) are a great deal stronger than me in a lot of ways. We need such salty folks to keep this church zesty, flavorful, and savory.

Of course, we can't depend just on them to keep this church going. We

need younger people who perhaps don't even realize the potential they have; people who need to be shown that they are also the salt of the earth, and can contribute to the delicious flavor of our church.

But how do we get them here?

Well, quite simply, we get them here by being the salt of the earth to them. And the good news is, it's really not that hard to do. All we need to do is flavor ourselves with kindness, compassion, mercy, and other such fruits of the spirit, so that this church becomes a place where the great and wonderful ways of God's kingdom are practiced. The flavor-enhancing "salt" of God's realm, when it's sprinkled liberally for others to taste, is a very delightful and pleasing spice that just isn't used often enough. But when it is used, it attracts people—especially those whose lives need or could use more flavor.

My doctor has told me I should cut down on my salt intake. I've passed that message on to the workers at the Wendy's up on Route One. Yes, these days, salt has a bad reputation—experts say it can cause high blood pressure, which in turn leads to other nasty physical ailments and a shorter, less healthy life. So, by all means let's cut down on our salt intake when we eat.

But as for the salt of the earth, well that's a whole other ball of wax. According to Jesus, we need to be that kind of salt—and the more saltiness the better—to make the world a better place by making people's lives better and more flavorful.

And it doesn't matter who you are, either. Everyone—young or old, healthy or frail, blue collar workers or white collar workers, college graduates and people whose formal schooling ended after high school—everyone can add saltiness to their lives.

Anyone can be salt of the earth and be a blessing to someone else in their own unique way.

Remember, my friends, whether you give thousands of dollars to the church or significantly less of an amount; whether you offer hours and hours of your time volunteering for our faith community or you simply give a smile and word of encouragement to someone who needs it, you're being the salt of the earth. And the world needs a lot more of that kind of salt.

So, let us never lose our saltiness. Rather, let us, individually and through the ministries of this wonderful church, make every effort to flavor the world with God's grace and love in Jesus Christ. Amen.