This morning you are in for a real deal: two sermons for the price of one. Rarely have I ever had the opportunity, to present such merchandise to the public.

So let me begin with the comic strip on the cover of our bulletin. You have likely seen this strip from time to time as it pops up in Bible Study on Tuesday mornings or occasionally on the cover of our Sunday bulletin. Each cartoon involves two sheep, presumably at coffee hour after the service. The one on the left, who never seems to quite get it, is Ted. The one on the right, playing the part of the straight man, is Rick.

In this morning’s cartoon, Ted is questioning Rick about Jesus’ comments about salt. Our Gospel reading today started with Jesus saying "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” Ted asks Rick “Wait. Is it Possible for salt to become un-salty?” Rick says “nope.” To which Ted replies, after an appropriately thoughtful pause…. “Now THAT’s deep!”

It’s a fun cartoon, that’s to be sure. But, as with many of the coffee-hour sheep cartoons, there’s an interesting point here. If salt in fact cannot lose its saltiness, then what was Jesus talking about? I think we need to take as given that Jesus was not in error. So then how do we reconcile his statement with the seemingly scientific fact that salt does not lose its saltiness? To answer that, I’m going to read a cultural reflection on this passage written by Biblical Scholar John Pilch, who teaches at Georgetown University.

As Dr. Pilch writes, “Modern visitors to Israel who travel the road north from Jerusalem toward Shechem notice clay-ovens next to some houses along the roadside. Many prefer to cook in these outdoor ovens rather than on their electric or propane gas stoves.
Ovens like these have been around since ancient times. In the biblical period each village had a common oven. Since villagers were often members of a very large, extended family, these common ovens were family ovens.

The common fuel for the oven was something that was more plentiful than wood: camel or donkey dung. One of the duties each young girl had to learn was to collect the dung, mix salt in it, and mold it into patties to be left in the sun to dry. In the Middle East and many Third World countries, such dung patties are still used as fuel today.

A slab of salt was placed at the base of the oven and upon it the salted dung patty. Salt has catalytic properties which cause the dung to burn. Eventually the salt slab loses its catalytic ability and becomes useless...

This is the Mediterranean cultural imagery Jesus has in mind when he says: “You, my disciples, are the salt, that is, catalyst for the earth-oven.” In the Aramaic and Hebrew languages which Jesus spoke, one and same word means “earth” and “clay-oven”.

Interesting, no? When Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt of the earth, he is telling them that they are the fire-starters for the oven. They are the ones that will cause things to catch fire and burn. They will start the fire that will bring about change. (By the way, I was this close to having the choir start singing “We didn’t start the fire” by Billy Joel. But I digress.)

When Jesus makes his comment about salt losing its taste, he is referring to the salt slab losing its ability to start fires.

Thus our seeming paradox is solved. Salt does not become unsalty, but it can lose its ability to do certain things that it is used to do. Even after it has lost its catalytic properties, I
wonder if it could still be used for some other salt-purposes, like preserving food. But then again, do you really want to use post-dung salt to keep your fish or beef from going bad?

But let’s not overthink the plumbing on this one. What Jesus is saying to the disciples with this salt business is basically this: You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the ones who are going to start the fire of this revolution. If you lose focus, if you lose direction, if you stop doing what you are meant to do, then you have lost all purpose and usefulness. That is a good message for us as well. There is sermon number one.

Sermon number two has less to do with what Jesus was saying, & more to do with how he was saying it. Jesus brought a message about the Kingdom of God to his disciples using metaphors and imagery that were common and observable in that place and time.

I think that we can follow the example of Jesus and do something similar. We too can find a message about the Kingdom of God using the metaphors and imagery of the world around us in this time and place. We can even do it using the same touchstone that Jesus did: salt.

When Jesus started talking to his disciples about salt, they started thinking about clay-ovens. When Jesus starts talking to me about salt….I start thinking about…the Winter Olympics. Have you started watching the Olympics yet? What sports have you watched so far? What are your favorite winter Olympic sports? I have a few I like. Ice Hockey. The Luge. And cross country skiing. I cross-country skied a couple of times when I was young, but it wasn’t the endurance event that it is in the Winter Olympics. This is the equivalent of running a marathon on skis. In the longest men’s event, they ski for 50km, or 31 miles…longer than the 26.2 miles of the traditional marathon.
Such an endeavor is incredibly taxing on the athletes that compete. And as strange as it might sound given that this is the WINTER Olympics, the cross-country athletes will be sweating a LOT, and so must guard against dehydration and Hyponatremia.

Have you heard of Hyponatremia? It means a low concentration of sodium in the blood. When you sweat your body not only loses water, but it also loses sodium, or salt. Once you’ve lost enough sodium, hyponatremia can set in. The spectrum of symptoms for it can range from mild to severe and can include nausea, muscle cramps, disorientation, slurred speech, and confusion. As it progresses, victims may experience seizures or coma, and even death is a possibility.

That’s why simply drinking water is not always good when you are engaged in intense exercise. You are replacing the water you have lost, but not the salt. To do that, you see athletes drinking liquids that contain sodium – things like Gatorade, powerade, or energy drinks. It is not simple coincidence, I suspect, that the official drink sponsor of the Winter Olympics is the energy drink ‘burn’, made by Coca-Cola.

I pondered while I was reading about this: why not salt-water? Can’t we just drink saltwater and replace our lost sodium. The answer of course is no. There is TOO MUCH salt in saltwater, and your body reacts by getting rid of even more water and you dehydrate further.

So that is the metaphor: Athletes’ bodies lose salt when they compete and they need to replenish it, but they need to do it in a balanced way. But how do we use this metaphor? What do we compare it to?

Well, when we do Kingdom work, that is, when we are following Jesus and doing the work of the Kingdom of God, we lose spiritual salt. Continually striving, driving, and charging
ahead with God’s work in the world wears us out, wears us down, and wears us thin. We lose spiritual salt. We need to replenish it, but we need to do it in a balanced way.

I guess what I’m talking about here is burnout, something that happens all too often to those who try to do the right thing, and sometimes end up doing more than they can sustainably do. A natural reaction is to just withdraw, isolate, and cut yourself off from church.

That would be like the Olympic athlete quitting. It would be like them saying: the sport has taken too much out of me, so I’m giving up the sport entirely. That’s short-sighted and also it doesn’t help them replenish what they have lost.

Another reaction might be to try and do even more – volunteering for more things, and spending more hours at the church. This would be like trying to recover by drinking salt water – you’ll just end up getting more depleted.

The balanced approach, the Gatorade approach if you will, would be to continue to do the things that feed you spiritually, even as you scale back the things that might be depleting you. Pray. Worship God. Maybe go on a retreat at a monastery. Rest. These things will replenish your spiritual salt.

And there’s one other very important thing that can replenish your spiritual salt: doing what we have been doing right here. Observe the world around you and see how it speaks to you about God’s activity in your life and in the world. Everything can speak to us about the kingdom of God, whether it’s cooking in clay ovens, watching the Winter Olympics, or anything in between. God is always giving us guidance and signs of hope – we just need to have eyes to see and ears to hear. There’s sermon number two.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.