

## 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," and even though I don't really like coffee 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, and although 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.

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 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." And I think she was right.

Because I'm sixty-three, 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.

Now I better understand 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 savorness, 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 are 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. "I was supposed to go before her. "Why should I go on living?" he asked me; but I'm pretty certain he was really asking himself that question. In his mind his life had lost its savorness, so his attitude was, "I'm no good, just throw me out."

That man forgot—as have lots of other people—that Jesus called him "the salt of the earth." That's a pretty important designation. And I believe people don't have to lose their saltiness when they grow older. 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 hopeful and uplifting fact. When we grow older, we don't have to remove the saltiness from our lives. We don't have to put ourselves on the shelf and wait for the expiration date to pass. Salt, you see, is a preservative. And when we keep the saltiness in our lives it keeps us young at heart.

Many older people in our church are keeping their saltiness. They are young at heart, and they're not going to allow anyone to throw them out and trample them underfoot. They would rather wear out than rust out. And God bless them for that. We need such salty folks to keep this church zesty and flavorful.

Of course, our church also needs younger people, who maybe don't even realize the potential they have and just need to be shown that they are also the

salt of the earth, and can contribute to the delicious flavor of our church and our world in their own unique way.

I had my annual physical a few days ago, and my doctor told me I should watch my salt intake. I've passed that message on to the workers at the Wendy's up on Route One. Yes, for quite some time now, salt has had a bad reputation. Experts tell us 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 being the salt of the earth, well that's a whole other kettle of fish. When it comes to that kind of salt, the more the better. I want you to reflect on something for a minute. I would like you to think of one way, one example—it doesn't have to be something spectacular or life-changing—one example of how you recently added flavor and zest to someone else's life.

Or maybe someone added flavor and zest to your life!

Would anyone like to share an example of that this morning?

If it's difficult to come up with an example, maybe that's telling us that the recipe we call our life needs a little something extra to add zest and flavor to it.

It needs more salt.

And so does the world.

So, let's get cooking, my friends. And don't forget the salt. Amen.