

Sermon for Lunar New Year  
By Rev. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
February 5, 2017  
Matthew 5:13-20

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We all know the importance salt plays to food. In Jesus' time, before refrigerators, salt was not only a seasoning to bring out the flavor in food; it also preserved food to last in the Mediterranean heat. Those who struggle with high blood pressure or are actively trying to prevent it know how the lack of salt kills flavor, unless you get creative with other seasonings. Salt also enhances the flavor of the rest of the ingredients.

I remember as a child, watching my grandmother make chocolate chip cookies. She set the ingredients out before combining them to make the delicious treats: sugar, butter, egg, vanilla, chocolate chips. Flour, baking soda, and... salt? As a young girl I knew chocolate chips were supposed to be a sweet flavor, not a savory flavor. I told my grandmother, "Be careful, Grandma, you are going to ruin the cookies by making them salty!" My grandmother explained to me that it is the salt that brings all the other flavors out; without it, well... and she quickly whipped up some cookie dough without any salt in it and put the spoon to my lips. In response, I passed her the round Morton salt box.

I remembered Chris telling a story about her grandmother, who she called Lola, and the essential seasoning growing up in the Filipino household where her grandmother helped to raise her. Chris shared it at her Lola's funeral, and I asked her to let me share her words today.

"When I got a bit older, around age 8 or 9, I wanted to help Lola create those delicious smells that would waft toward me when I opened the door coming home from school. In truth, it was less about the love of cooking

than about earning my Lola's approval and praise. I was the eager and clumsy padwan to her masterful and magical jedi cooking skills.

"After many hours of watching and waiting for my chance... she eventually let me mix ingredients, crack some eggs and stir the pot, but my knife skills weren't quite up to par. As Hawaii 5-0 and I Love Lucy re-runs played loudly in the background, I did my tasks proudly and methodically.

One day, she had a very important assignment for me. She had run out of a crucial ingredient...something she called *betchen* (phonetic spelling). She usually had a huge canister of betchen right by the stove, but today it was empty. It was my mission to go to the store and find exactly what she was looking for...that key ingredient. If I failed, the dish wouldn't be right. The success of that night's family dinner rested on me.

I took my charge seriously. I was ready to do this.

When I asked my grandmother for the money to pay for the missing ingredient, she pointed to the bucket full of pennies. I frowned.

She saw my ungrateful face and immediately chastised me, "What?!? That's money. You don't think that's money?!? That's a lot of money!" I looked at her with slumped shoulders and walked over to the bucket full of pennies. I meticulously counted and stacked 100 pennies. Then I stacked four identical stacks and slid them into a plastic bag. Five dollars, in pennies, to buy betchen.

As I walked out the door my grandmother yelled, "Remember it's called Ajinomoto."

Confused, I yelled back, "I thought it was betchen."

Lola hollered back in Tagalog, "That's what we call it. But at the white people grocery store, it's called Ajinomoto. It should be by the salt and spices. A-GENIE-MOH-TOE. You need to get that."

I hopped on my bike and repeated “Ajinomoto” over and over like a mantra, all the way to the Key Foods across town.

I had been so confident striding into the Key Foods, pennies jangling in my pants.

I went straight for the spices...found the salt section and looked for the tell-tale red and white label. It wasn't there.

I whispered “Ajinomoto” over and over to myself – willing it to appear. Salt, pepper, oregano, thyme, dried basil...but no Ajinomoto.

I walked around the store looking for another spice section, but there was only one place.

I began to panic. This was the one thing she trusted me to do and I messed it up. All I had to do was find the betchen, I mean Ajinomoto, and go home and I'd be the hero. But coming back empty-handed...that wasn't an option.

So, I blinked and stared and looked behind the salt again and again. I closed my eyes and they started to water.

“Christina! What are you doing here?”

My eyes shot open.

It was Tita Jojo...a family friend who lived a few blocks from me.

“I'm looking for Ajinomoto for my Lola...but I can't find it,” I said shyly.

I pointed to prove that I had truly looked.

“Oh, you're looking for MSG! Here it is!” as she pulled it off the shelf and handed it to me.

“That's Ajinomoto?”

“No, but it's *betchen*...just another brand.”

The daily acts that immigrants and their families perform to live within two cultures are tremendous: thinking and speaking in two languages. Navigating the body language, facial expressions, and customs. Figuring out who to respect and how to gain respect for yourself and your family. Choosing which values from home to celebrate and continue, and which ones to leave behind across the oceans as you become someone new-- only to find that those things you treasure and value are not necessarily the things your children grow to treasure and value. And of course, the food. Food is so important to the soul and to wellness. Can I tell you what kind of faces I have seen on church members I have visited in the hospital who have been served unnaturally colored Jello and powdered chicken broth?

Some of my Korean friends in seminary describe a feeling of burden among immigrants they know as han: a condition of mixed bitterness, yearning, and sadness, of silently endured hardship and sense of incompleteness<sup>1</sup>. I wonder if living between two cultures can sometimes feel as if you have lost your saltiness.

Jesus said, "Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will save it." (Luke 17:33). One act of grace is that Jesus did not say "You will become salt if you do it right." Jesus did not say "If you succeed, you will be the light of the world." Jesus did not promise that if you hold fast to your old ways, or bend to the new ways, that you will become salt and light. No. Jesus said, "You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world. Taste the salt. See the light. Taste and see: God has already put within us the stuff we need to glorify God. Taste and see: you are enough, as you are. And just as Jesus lived at the coming together of cultures: Roman and Jew, human, and divine, we too can inhabit that space at the intersections and find something holy there.

We are about to taste and see: see the Fireplace room dressed in red; see the characters and symbols of luck and blessing, prosperity and health

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Glionna, "A Complex Feeling Tugs at Koreans" in The LA Times, Jan. 5, 2011

suspended in joyful optimism. See red pockets that reveal unknown treats. And we will taste the seasoning from dozens of homes, many cultures. We will share these foods together as a community of faith. This act of sharing food is also one of solidarity: in tasting and honoring the flavor of each different culture, we honor as friends and family the people who come from these cultures.

Here is a story I heard last week on NPR: “A pair of scientists tested the effects of eating together and what happens when people either eat the same food, or when they eat different foods. In one of their experiments, they had volunteers play the role of a manager and a union representative.

The two had to agree on the hourly wage that management was willing to pay and that union members were to receive. Pairs of volunteers were sometimes given candy to eat together or sometimes given salty snacks. And sometimes, one of the volunteers was given one kind of food and the other was given the other kind of food. When the volunteers ate the same kinds of food, they reached agreement much more quickly than when one person ate the candy and the other person ate the salty food.

It took them 3.6 rounds to reach an agreement when they're both eating sweets. When one person is eating salty food, like potato chips and pretzels and so on, while the other person is eating sweets, then it takes them on average 7.3 rounds of the game until they finally settle on their hourly wage.

Food is about bringing something into the body. And to eat the same food suggests that we are both willing to bring the same thing into our bodies. People just feel closer to people who are eating the same food as they do. And then trust, cooperation, these are just consequences of feeling close to someone.<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>2</sup> Shandar Vendatam, “Why Eating the Same Food Increases People’s Trust and Cooperation” on Morning Edition NPR, Feb. 2, 2017

This New Year potluck meal we are about to share is not communion. But it might as well be. I am convinced that Jesus will be among us. I am convinced that as our tongues travel over new combinations of flavors, our hearts and minds also stretch to include those who made them, and we discover in a physical way what it can mean to be the body of Christ. I am convinced that as we taste the salt in the dishes, and see the light on one another's faces, we are strengthened to be the salt and light-- together-- that Jesus has already named us to be. May it be so! Amen.