

Sermon on Matthew 5:13-20

I recently learned a new use for salt that I had not been aware of before. A few weeks ago, I had purchased a different brand of coffee to use for our Open Door mornings, and it definitely had a more bitter flavor to it. Monty came in and sprinkled some salt onto the coffee as it was sitting in the filter, about to be brewed, and I looked at him like he was crazy. Little did I know that a little bit of salt can take away that bitter edge to coffee! Of course, I had to google, and I learned that the sodium ions block bitter taste receptors and in doing so, it also naturally enhances the sweeter flavors of coffee.

In today's Scripture passage, as we continue on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about both salt and light as metaphors for understanding what it means to be citizens of God's kingdom. And as a refresher, last week, I reminded us that when Jesus speaks these words of the Sermon in the Mount, he is not in a peaceful, neutral setting. He's standing in Roman-occupied Galilee where soldiers patrol the streets and the poor are crushed beneath extractive and exploitative taxation practices. He is standing in a time and place where religious leaders were also under pressure to cooperate with imperial power in order to survive. People are anxious, tired, and wondering where God is in all of this. It is within this reality that Jesus gathers ordinary people, fishermen, laborers, women, peasants, and begins to describe a different kingdom – not Rome's kingdom, not Herod's kingdom, but God's kingdom.

Early in this sermon, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Notice the present tense. Jesus doesn't say, "One day you will be the salt of the earth, when you have gotten your act together." You are. Right now. Jesus is declaring vocation. He is telling them who they are in God's story. He is telling us who we are in God's story.

So we begin with that image of salt. In Scripture, salt is not just practical, it is theological. In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, salt is connected to covenant. In Leviticus, offerings are seasoned with salt. In Numbers, God speaks of a "covenant of salt," of a lasting, faithful bond. Salt represents faithfulness and preservation. So when Jesus calls his disciples "salt," he is placing them inside Israel's calling, to be a people who preserve God's justice and mercy in the world. He's calling them to remain faithful and to counter the rot and decay of the world.

In Jesus' time, salt was essential for survival, not simply a flavoring for food. There was no refrigeration, no preservatives. Meat and fish were packed in salt to keep them from decaying. Without salt, food became dangerous. So when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he's saying to his followers, "You stand between life and decay. You resist what

destroys and preserve what gives life.” Being salt is about preventing moral and spiritual collapse, and Jesus knows his listeners are living under a system that leads to decay: economic exploitation, state violence, racial and economic hierarchy, and dehumanization of the poor. Jesus knows that Empire always produces rot when it normalizes cruelty, condemns compassion, and teaches people to accept injustice as the status quo.

In the midst of this, Jesus tells us that we, as people of the kingdom, are the preservative. We are meant to slow the rot. We are meant to interrupt it. We are meant to protect human dignity, to preserve that which recognizes the divine image in every life. To be salt looks like telling the truth when lies dominate, refusing to dehumanize anyone, practicing costly solidarity, choosing conscience over comfort, and remaining rooted in love.

And then Jesus gives the warning – “If salt loses its saltiness, it’s useless, is thrown out, and trampled under foot.” He is saying, if my people stop being distinctive and instead mirror or support empire’s practices of decay, if they bless injustice, then they are ceasing to serve God’s purpose. A church that looks like Caesar’s kingdom has lost its way.

Jesus goes on to say, “You are the light of the world.” This language comes straight from Israel’s Scriptures. Isaiah called Israel “a light to the nations,” a people meant to reflect God’s justice and mercy. Light in the Bible represents truth, life, revelation, and God’s presence. Jesus is saying, “You are continuing Israel’s vocation. You are God’s visible witnesses!” In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” Now he shares that calling with us, as we become reflectors of that light.

One of the things that we often miss in today’s world that is so focused on individualism is that in the Bible, darkness is never just personal sin. It represents systemic sin, oppression, exile, violence. Rome claimed to bring “light” to the world through Caesar, through empire, but it was a false light that in fact, hid injustice. But Jesus offers true light, that exposes lies, that reveals suffering, and also shows God’s reign. The light, like Jesus, is not neutral. It always reveals something. Being light today, the light that reflects Jesus, means exposing propaganda, naming injustice, uplifting truth, refusing to be silent, and making God’s love and compassion visible in places of darkness. And Jesus says that this light belongs on a stand, visible for everyone to see. This light, this faith is public. Discipleship is not personal or private, it is visible to the world.

And then Jesus goes on to say that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and he concludes by saying, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” In Jewish thought, righteousness means right relationship – right relationship with God, right relationship with neighbor, and right relationship with community. The Pharisees were serious about obedience, but too

often, rules replaced mercy. Jesus is not rejecting law, he is fulfilling it. He is revealing its heart, and at the heart of the law is justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Kingdom righteousness is relational, not transactional. This righteousness is shaped by grace and it flows from love.

This whole section of Matthew's Gospel sits inside a larger conflict: God's kingdom versus human empire which we began to explore last week with the beatitudes. Rome says that power saves, that violence secures peace, and that loyalty to Caesar is the currency. But Jesus says instead, love saves, that truth gives freedom, and that faithfulness is more important than power.

This week, many of us have been paying attention to the news. We've seen renewed attention to the Epstein files, which contain one horrible revelation after another, and once again we've been reminded how easily wealth and power can hide exploitation, how long survivors can be ignored, and how often systems protect themselves instead of protecting the vulnerable.

We've watched ongoing debates and crackdowns around immigration, where human beings created in God's image are talked about as problems, threats, or statistics instead of neighbors, children, and families.

Maybe you, like me, paid attention to the things said at the National Prayer Breakfast, where God's name was spoken in rooms full of power, where prayer and politics were blended in ways that probably sounded impressive to the people sitting there, but had no connection with the words and the ways of Jesus.

And this week, many of us also saw a post made by our sitting President that mocked a former President and First Lady in racially charged and demeaning ways. Moments like that matter, because they teach people what kind of cruelty is acceptable.

In week like this, Jesus' words feel like an especially important reminder and calling: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." These are exactly the moments when salt is needed. When abuse is hidden, salt says, "We will not let this rot be ignored." When survivors are silenced, salt says, "Your story matters." When fear is used to divide, salt says, "Every person bears God's image." When faith is performative, salt says, "God is not a prop for power." And these are exactly the moments when light is needed. When truth is buried under loads of distractions, light reveals it. When lies spread quickly, light slows them down. When cruelty is normalized, light exposes it. When religion is used to justify injustice, light points us right back to Christ, and his words and actions.

When Jesus tells us that we are salt and light, he is not asking us to be louder than everyone else, or to be the ones victorious in every argument or debate. He's not asking us

to be the ones who “win Facebook.” He is asking us to be faithful. He is asking us to preserve what is good, to defend those who are easily forgotten. He is asking us to tell the truth even when it costs us, and to love our neighbors even when fear feels easier.

Faith loses its saltiness when it gets too comfortable with power, and light gets hidden when disciples choose silence instead of courage.

While Washington might hold a lot of our attention these days, and Jesus’ words about salt and light certainly have a word for us there, the word is also for us in they day in and day out of our lives. It’s about what happens in us. It’s about how we talk in our homes, about how we post online. It’s about how we speak about immigrants, and about how we treat people with whom we disagree. It’s about how we use God’s name.

So what does faithfulness look like now? It means: when we see Christian nationalism claiming the name of God to wield power, we proclaim Christ crucified. When we see rhetoric and policy that seeks to incite fear of the “other,” whomever that may be, we practice hospitality. When racism continues to divide, we work to build beloved community. When authoritarianism demands loyalty, we say no – we follow Jesus. Being salt and light can come through public witness, or quiet faithfulness. It can come through community organizing and mutual aid. It can come through teaching our children about justice and refusing to dehumanize anyone. But ultimately it all comes when we continually turn our eyes upon Jesus, the one who is the light of the world, the one who shows us the way, and the one who sends us the Spirit to guide us, transform us, and to help us grow in the ways of the kingdom.

Notice again: Jesus does not say, “Become salt and light,” he says, “You are.” This is grace. This is our identity given to use before any kind of achievement. We are salt and light because we belong to Christ.

In every age, God’s people live in the midst of broken systems. In every age, God’s people are called to be salt and lite – to preserve what is good, to reveal truth, and to embody love. May we be salt and light today. Amen.