

Epiphany 5A— Matthew 5:13-20
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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What would you think if, as you all were leaving worship this morning, I greeted you at the back by handing you a nametag and the title of a new job you'd be taking on? You may have come here today as a nurse, but you'll be leaving as an architect. Ok, you've been working for the twenty years as an office secretary, but from now on you'll be...a farmer! And, you—you thought you be a construction worker till the day you'd die, but, look!, now you are a university professor. If I were to do that, you might be a little confused and a bit scared—you don't know the first thing about farming or designing skyscrapers or teaching a college course! You probably think I've lost my mind.

When we read in today's gospel lesson how Jesus declares to his followers "you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world," that's what it seems Jesus is doing—taking a bunch of craftsmen, laborers, fishermen and farmers and handing them new job assignments—salt and light. But that's not what is actually going on here. You see, the jobs that Jesus was handing out here are not entirely new. They were in fact what the people of Israel, the Jews, had been charged with doing long ago.

You see, the story of Israel is the story of a people who have been chosen by God, who had been set apart and marked for a special purpose. This began way back with the call of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. God promised Abraham, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great. You shall *be a blessing*; and I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. *And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" Abraham was blessed to be a blessing.

Skip ahead several generations. Abraham's descendants are now slaves in Egypt. God hears their pleas and through his servant Moses, God liberates the Israelites from Egypt and leads them through the Red Sea, into the wilderness. No longer slaves, God invites them into a special relationship with Him, into a covenant. God will be their God and they will be his people. And he gives them rules, the Law, to tell them how they are to live together with God and with each other. They are not to be like other nations, God says. They are to be holy as God is holy. And in this way, in their common life, they are to show the rest of the world how to live. They are to be the model nation, the prototype for a new humanity. They are supposed to show other peoples how it's done.

The only problem is that they remembered their chosenness but they forgot what they were chosen *for*. They took for granted the special relationship they enjoyed with God and the blessings it gave. But they forgot that it came with responsibilities. So God sent the prophets to give them a little reminder. One of those prophets was Isaiah. God spoke through him, saying: "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as *a light to the nations*, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison." Did you catch that? Israel is to be "a light to the nations."

When Jesus is speaking to his Jewish followers, who were the descendants of those wayward Israelites, telling them that they are “the light of the world,” he is in fact summoning them to their original calling. He is challenging Israel to *be* Israel, to be the people of God, which is not so much an identity as it is a task, a mission. They are to be a beacon of hope to the world, he says, a “city on a hill.” That was what Jerusalem, the capitol of Israel, was literally—a city on a hill. It sat high on a plateau above the Kidron Valley and was visible for miles around. Jesus’ followers are to be like that, like Jerusalem, a city on a hill, a beacon of hope, a lighthouse through which God shines the bright light of truth to all the nations, summoning them to safe harbor in Him. His followers are to be that because that is who they are.

You may be wondering, What does that have to do with us? We’re not Jews, we’re not descendants of Israel. That’s true of course in a literal sense. Very few, if any, of us can trace our genealogy back to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Yet, by virtue of our baptism, we believe that we Christians have been united to Jesus, made one with him, and through him, we have been made part of God’s people. St. Paul uses an image from viticulture, growing grapes. He says that we are a wild grape branch that God has grafted onto the vine of Israel. We’ve married into it, you could say. We have been invited to share in this legacy, this heritage, this calling of Israel to be God’s chosen people. We have been invited to embrace the calling originally given to Israel—to light the way for a world stumbling in darkness.

That’s an awesome charge, I know, being responsible to show the world how to live, how to live well and live rightly. And you may well be thinking you don’t much like it, don’t much like having to take on to that responsibility. But that’s what Jesus wants us to understand. Jesus began his Sermon last week telling us about the new world that God is creating, the Kingdom of heaven coming to earth. And now he’s telling us that we have a part to play in that world, in the new order that God is ushering in. God has a job for us. It’s like those World War II recruiting posters, you know, the ones with the picture of Uncle Sam pointing at you, saying “I want you for the US Army.” Jesus is pointing at us, saying “I want you for God’s mission.”

This charge is even more clear when you consider the *other* name Jesus gives us. Not only are we “the light of the world,” we are also, he says, “the salt of the earth.” We don’t think much about salt these days—except perhaps when our driveways and roads are icy or when we order French fries at a restaurant. But for the larger part of human history, salt was a very important commodity. It had an important role in cleansing wounds, in ratifying covenants, in liturgical functions, and even as currency. In fact, that’s where we get the word “salary” from, from *salarium*, the salt wage that Roman soldiers were paid. This is also where we get the phrase, “worth his salt,” as in ‘worth his wages.’ But by far the most important use for salt is in our food. Did you know that salt is the only mineral that humans take directly from the earth and eat? While some of us worry today about consuming too much salt, salt is an important part of the human diet. We would die without it. We’d also find a good bit of otherwise tasty food to be dull and lifeless, were it not for salt. When used thoughtfully, it sharpens and defines flavors and aromas, and melds flavors in ways that transform bland dishes into something complex and wonderful. Salt controls the ripening of cheese, strengthens the gluten in bread, and preserves meats, an indispensable ability before the advent of refrigeration.

Given its ability to preserve and to bring out flavor, salt seems like an apt metaphor for the role of Christians in society—to preserve society from corruption and decay and to enhance the enjoyment of life. And many a preacher has taken advantage of that connection to good effect...

The only problem with this interpretation is that it doesn't make much sense when we consider what Jesus says about salt "losing" its saltiness. Salt is a very stable, non-reactive compound, and can't strictly speaking lose its saltiness. I mean, just try to get rid of the saltiness in a soup when you botched up the recipe and added too much salt. It can't be done. Salt can be diluted in water or adulterated with other chemicals. But it can't lose its saltiness. So what could Jesus have meant?

A possible answer can be found in another use for salt, one that few people appreciate outside of the Holy Land. You see, in Jesus' day, salt wasn't just used in food, but also in cooking. In Israel, families would have these large, outdoor earthen ovens to bake their bread in. Wood was scarce in Israel in those days—indeed still is—so the common fuel for these ovens was not wood, but something which was more plentiful: camel or donkey dung. And it was the duty of a youngest child in the family to collect the dung each day, mix salt in it, mould it into patties, and leave the patties in the sun to dry. The dung patties would then be gathered in heaps to be used as fuel. When it was time to bake, a salt plate was placed at the base of the oven and upon it the salted dung patty. The salt would act as a catalyst, causing the dung to burn hotter and faster. Eventually, the salt slab would be broken down by the fire and lose its catalytic ability, at which point it was useless and thrown out.

This helps to shed some light on Jesus' expression, "salt of the earth." What Jesus is talking about is not salt of the "earth," but the salt of the "earthen" ovens—the Greek word is the same. This salt is not used for flavoring food or preventing spoilage, but for catalyzing reactions, igniting things, getting things started. For us to be salt of the earth, then, it means we are to be catalysts, helping to incite the change that God is bringing about in his Kingdom. Without salt, the earthen oven will not be able to produce fire for cooking and for warmth. In the same way, without the catalytic ability of the disciples, the "earth"—the world of men and women—would not catch fire with God's transforming love.

So we have an important part to play in God's plans, in his efforts to transform the world in his love. Which is why Jesus warns us against forgetting who we are. What good, he asks, is a light if it's hidden under a bucket? What good is salt if it's spent? It's wasted, worthless, useless. And that's not who we are. That's not who God has made us to be, not who God has called us to be. We are salt and light. We have been chosen, set apart for a purpose that is different from the world. That doesn't mean we are supposed to remove ourselves from the world. As someone else has put it, "The world is in the soup, that's where the salt needs to be."

We have a part to play in the world, an important part, influencing society as salt and light. So how are we to do this? Jesus will spell it out much clearer over the next few weeks, as he talks about how we are to deal with anger, lust, divorce, swearing, and people who hurt us—describing the counter-cultural lifestyle we are to exhibit. But for now, the challenge is to understand our place in God's plan, to appreciate how all that we are and all that say and do are

an expression of our identity, our calling in Christ, so that others might look at us, at the good things we do, and give glory to God.

And so to help you remember who you are, I have nametags for you. Ushers will hand them out to you. When you get your nametag, I don't want you to write your name. I want you to write on it who you are in Christ: "Hi, my name is...salt and light." Then as you leave, when you get home, stick it on your car dashboard or bathroom mirror or on the inside of your front door, so that as you get ready in the morning or leave to do your work in the world, you can remember the great and high calling you have: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. That is who you are. Thanks be to God!