

Matthew 5:13-20: Salt and Light

5 February 2023, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY

C. Nolan Huizenga

Listen with me for God's word to us from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 (CEB):

¹³ [Jesus said,] "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷ "Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You are the salt of the earth.

What comes to mind when you hear that? I asked Megan this week and she said, "the ocean." She's right. If somehow we could extract all the salt from our planet's seawater, that would result in enough salt to spread it 500 feet thick over the entire land surface of the Earth.¹ That amount of salt is also equal to the mass of the Moon.² Which makes salt an incredibly common mineral. But it's still a powerful substance.

Salt in small amounts brings out the liveliness and beauty in food. The cook Samin Nosrat wrote a book called *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, accompanied later by a documentary TV series of the same name. Samin says, "Salt has a greater impact on flavor than any other ingredient.... Add it in the right amount, at the right time, in the right form, and your food will be delicious."³

And salt in stronger doses can preserve foods for long storage. Before canning or refrigeration, this was one way that humans survived seasons when food couldn't be grown.

Salt in overwhelming quantity, though, can make soil infertile. Or water. Like in the Dead Sea, which borders on Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank. Because the Dead Sea contains 34% salt,

¹ <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/why-ocean-salty>

² <https://www.americoceans.org/facts/how-much-salt-in-ocean/>

³ <https://www.saltfatacidheat.com/salt>

nothing bigger than bacteria and microbes can live there. People in Jesus' homeland might have recognized salt as good and valuable, yet also capable of smothering life under the wrong conditions.

But can salt lose its saltiness? Salt is actually very stable chemically and doesn't lose its properties over time. If salt is mixed with other things, though, those additives can break down and potentially ruin the taste. So maybe that's what Jesus is implying here — don't let your salty witness get diluted so much that it becomes flavorless.

Or maybe Jesus is up to something else. The Greek word used here for flavorless also means to be made foolish. So we might hear Jesus saying, "You are the salt of the earth. Flavor the world well. But if your witness devolves into foolishness, what good is that?"

Sadly, followers of Jesus play the fool all too often. This week a church member told me that a non-churchy friend once said, "You and your husband have shown me that Christians aren't *all* completely wackadoo. Now I've learned that some of them are actually nice people." So that's a small win.

When we do squander our witness to Jesus, it's not always because we're actively choosing foolishness over faith. It also could be because we're just exhausted. It's hard to flavor the world with Christlike love if you yourself feel defeated, or if you find yourself hopelessly mired in toxic relationships, or if the people in your circle practice complaining more than creativity. When collective foolishness — community foolishness — becomes the water we swim in, we might not even remember what it means to live differently, to be the salt of the earth that Jesus tells us we are.

Here's one basic way to restore that saltiness that is our calling: Be kind. Another person told me this week that in every situation, personal or professional, he tries to cultivate kindness. That, my friends, is Micah 6:8, which we heard in worship last week: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Micah says it, Jesus says it, Kurt Vonnegut says it: You've got to be kind. "Whoever keeps these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

You are the light of the world.

In the earliest moments of the Big Bang photons — the smallest units of light — careened into and out of other particles, making light a primal entity in our universe. In Genesis God's first words are "Let there be light" — one of those cases where the ancient tradition and today's science can sing in harmony.

The new James Webb Space Telescope has enabled us to see the farthest yet across space and time. We can now observe light from galaxies more than 13 billion lightyears away. Which

means it took 13+ billion years for that light to reach us. That's getting close to the age of the universe as we understand it.

From a physics perspective, the light of the world helps us understand how our universe formed, how our reality works. And of course light lets us navigate our lives.

From a spiritual perspective, the light of the world also arrives from the mouth of God. Psalm 119 says, "The entrance and unfolding of your words give light, O God."⁴ At Christmas we heard the writer of John proclaim that God's illuminating word arrived in our world enfleshed in Jesus.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus now has people listening to him: his disciples gathered close, the larger crowds listening nearby on the hillside, and maybe passersby overhearing him from a distance. And he says to them all, "You are the light of the world." The light that Jesus embodies he now radiates out to his hearers. Even to you and me a few millennia later.

And he knows we might not always shine brightly. So he gives the image of covering an oil lamp with a basket. That's an obviously foolish plan which we will not demonstrate today. Again Jesus tells us who God created us to be — the light of the world — and playfully invites us to rise above our light-smothering foolishness.

Our colleague Chris Chakoian is pastor of Westwood Presbyterian in Los Angeles. Writing about these verses in Matthew, she points out that salt and light are the most ordinary of elements.

Still, both salt and light are essential to life: salt, for taste; light, for finding one's way.... Like ordinary salt, or ordinary light, our goal is to be beneficial, useful, *lifegiving* elements in the world. To the extent we are able to stay true to this calling, we will give glory to God.⁵

It's as straightforward as that: when we remember who we are as Christ's family, God employs us to salt the world with beauty and love. God employs us to light the world with hope and grace.

Chris Chakoian writes more, helping us church folks evaluate whether we are being salt and light. She says,

We tend to measure a church's success by the prominence of the congregation, and while it is...likely that faithful disciples are to be found in tall-steeple churches in the center of town, they are just as likely to be found in tiny emerging communities in the city, gathering young adults in coffeehouses for safe and honest conversation.

We tend to measure a church's value by numbers at worship, and while it is...likely that faithful disciples are attending a megachurch in the suburbs, it is just as likely that they

⁴ Psalm 119:130, Amplified Bible

⁵ Chakoian, Christine. "Matthew 5:13-16: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1, Chapters 1-13*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. p. 83.

are attending a tiny rural congregation that makes sure its elderly neighbors are regularly visited or that new immigrants have food to eat.

We tend to measure a church's worth by the power its members have accrued; while it is likely that faithful disciples [may] be found among titans of commerce or politics, they are just as likely to be found among the unemployed who volunteer to help [those experiencing homelessness] or [victims of abuse] or underprivileged children, serving those who are in at least as much difficulty as they are.⁶

I can bear witness to her last point. My brother-in-law Joseph needed to change careers, and he's been searching diligently for a job for half a year. While he does that, he has also committed to caring for refugees and immigrants. I've watched him turn his own vulnerability into passionate volunteering and advocacy on behalf of others. I'm humbled and inspired by the light that he's shining.

In a few minutes when we come together to share Christ's meal, pay attention to the various people around you. Remember that Jesus looks around at all his disciples — no matter the state of their faith, no matter their level of exhaustion, no matter the extent of their foolishness — and Jesus reminds them all, reminds us all:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

In the name of the Source, the Light, and the Reflection.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 83, 85.