

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 5, 2023

Matthew 5:13-20

13“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 14“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

SERMON:

“You are salt of the earth”. We might think Jesus’ words are innocuous. They are revolutionary. Jesus speaks to crowds of people, many individuals broken in some way and most living under a rule that declares them expendable for the sake of the empire.

Jesus’ words might be for every single individual. For sure Jesus says all of you are salt of the earth. Jesus is calling it like it is— just like he does when he pronounces blessing on those who are trampled down or shoved aside.

Jesus never tells us “now just go out there and be poor and meek.” To the poor and meek he says, “God values you”.

Now Jesus says “you are the salt of the earth”. You can imagine people relate to salt. Salt seasons food. Salt preserves. Salt signifies commitment and loyalty as part of religious ceremony. Salt even fired cooking ovens.

Sociologists and historians have learned that several households often shared a large clay cooking oven fuelled by manure. The manure needs something to ignite it and for the fuel to burn hotter. Salt plates were the catalyst. More than a fun fact here because eventually the salt plates would wear out. Jesus warns us that we often forget who and whose we are. When that happens we’ve lost our salt-ness. Older Bible translations quote Jesus as saying when salt no longer seasons and is no longer good for the dung heap, he means salt is no longer a catalyst to ignite fuel for cooking. It’s at this point salt is no longer essentially salt...it’s just stuff we walk over.

Jesus tells the so-called expendables that they are essential. Since you are essential, you’re free to live creatively, joyously and lovingly. And you live that way for the sake of the world God loves.

Keep in mind that Matthew’s Gospel was first directed to a small and marginalized group of Jesus followers—Matthew is the first to use language about church. Taking that as a cue, it fits that we can talk about the church being salt for the world too.

Our bodies need salt to function properly. We salt our food. Salt even makes for nice finishes on pottery! So maybe for the church there are a lot of ways we can be salt. That’s tough for us to remember!

When we think the world really likes paprika or turmeric, we erroneously conclude that we should be paprika or turmeric. Maybe

then people would join us and even donate money. Does the world really need salt anymore?

The writer of First Peter says we are a peculiar people...we might use another phrase that we are a contrast society. Even those words come from an ancient promise from God to Sarai an Abram that they would be blessed so that they and their descendants would be a blessing.

God changes the lives of Sarai, Hanna, Ruth and Naomi. Those individual transformations are just the beginning of God's relentlessly loving agenda to mend all that's broken.

Jesus invites the crowds into God's audacious project as he tells them they already are salt of the earth.

Salty beatitudes people believe God cares for the vulnerable and marginalized. Salty beatitudes people live lives of justice and mercy.

In our particularity as Christians, we are grafted into the family of salty beatitudes people. When we baptize we remind ourselves that this is part of who we are. We also reaffirm our commitments to what being salty for the world's sake means...

We are...baptized and set free "to proclaim Christ in word and deed, to care for others and the world God made and to work for justice and peace" (baptism ELW p.228). Dear Lord, let it be so with us and among us.