

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
Epiphany V
February 5, 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, "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.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Salt and Light. Jesus says, "You are salt of the earth. You are light of the world." These words are part of one of my favorite parts of the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount. It runs for quite a while, chapters, 5, 6 and 7 in Matthew.

When I was a young person, a teenager, 16, 17 years old, I used to ride my bike over to the church, St. Mary's in Kinston, NC. This was back in the day when the church doors were unlocked all the time. There were these beautiful windows from the Willet studios in Philadelphia...lots of deep blues and reds... circling round the nave of the church, telling the story of Jesus from birth to resurrection. And up top, at the lectern, was a huge Bible, King James Version. I know this makes me beyond weird...and in fact one of you who has heard this story called me just that...but I used to love being in that space and reading from that Bible. Actually, at one point, I had the entire Sermon on the Mount, King James Version (KJV), memorized. So, yes, this is one of my favorite parts of the Bible.

Salt and Light. Jesus says, "You are salt of the earth. You are light of the world." The "you" in this sentence is in the plural. You all. Southern

English gets it. This is also where the ancient English of the KJV is better, it had the word “Ye”, the plural of “you”, so it was obvious.

We are told at the beginning of the sermon that Jesus went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them saying...blessed are the poor in spirit...and so on.” So the Ye...the y’all Jesus is talking to are his disciples...as a group.

A disciple refers to a person who follows a great leader, passes on the teaching and emulates the leader’s life. ¹ Originally, according to Matthew’s story, Jesus was talking to a group of disciples, a group of people who had made the commitment, and who lived in Palestine 2000 years ago. That is the “Ye”, the “you all” being addressed.

But because Jesus’ words were remembered, written down and then incorporated into the gospel, Jesus speaks to “us all”. We are salt of the earth. We are light of the world.

What does this mean? There is some confusion. There are some difficulties. Jesus says we are salt, but also that we are in danger of losing our saltiness. How is that possible? Salt is Sodium Chloride, NaCl, and it is very stable. It doesn’t deteriorate. I consulted some chemists on this!

“The most common explanation for this (idea of losing saltiness) is that what would have been called salt in (the ancient world) was quite impure, containing a wide array of other compounds. Of the substances in this mix (sodium chloride) was the most soluble in water and if exposed to moisture (it) would disappear leaving a white powder looking just like salt, but not having its flavour or its preservative abilities. The salt used in the area mostly came from mines around the Dead Sea and material extracted from that area demonstrates these same properties today. (It is also possible foul play was at work.) Salt was extremely valuable and unscrupulous merchants may have replaced the salt with other substances. For some purposes gypsum was

¹ <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-understanding-meaning-term-disciple>

added to salt, but this would erase its flavour and make it unfit for consumption.”²

Now, what I want you to see is that there is a connection to this saying about salt losing its saltiness and one of the beatitudes. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Salt can become so impure, “so mixed with other elements that it loses its function.”³ True salt can leach away, leaving nothing good behind.

One commentator has said that “Purity of heart...refers to the single-minded devotion to God appropriate to monotheistic faith. Having an ‘undivided heart’...is the corollary of monotheism, and requires that there be something big enough and good enough to merit one’s whole devotion, rather than the functional polytheism of parceling oneself out to a number of loyalties.”⁴ Losing our saltiness means that we let the culture around us leach away our commitment...that we have too many things in the mix, too many impurities ... that we have given in to a functional polytheism of parceling ourselves out to a number of loyalties.

If we are pure in heart, we are focused solely on God and with that singularity of focus, we see God. We stay salty.

Jesus says to his disciples...to those who follow him, pass on his teaching, and live like him...you are salt. We don’t have to try and be salt...he says we are salt by virtue of following him. We just have to keep the impurities out, not let our hearts be leached away.

And pure salt is amazing. “ (In ancient Palestine) A bag of salt was reckoned as precious as a (person’s) life...Salt gives zest to food. Christian folk ought to add joy to the common day because they are Christian –the zest of serenity, trust, (respect, love), and worship.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_5:13

³ The New Interpreter’s Bible, (1995) volume VIII, page 181.

⁴ Ibid page 179

Salt is a preservative: food spoils without it... (By extension) Society easily becomes corrupt (without it). Greed, (anger, name calling, insults, lies, hate, self-absorption take over. Civil discourse stops. Polarization reigns. Does this sound at all familiar?). These are the forces of death (and decay), and they are not stayed unless some folk are salt.”⁵ And it just takes a pinch! My doctor has said, “Go easy.” However, where our society is concerned right now, we might need to be a little heavy handed...think Smithfield ham.

But this is our job, to be salt, this is who Jesus had made us to be. This is who we are, unless we get in the way, become functional polytheists, dilute our purpose.

Now I know that I am running out of time here...but Jesus also said, “We are light of the world.” “The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are.”⁶ This function of light is seen in Jesus’ words, don’t put the light under a basket, but let it give light to the house. The metaphor of the city on a hill provides a provocative contrast to this.⁷ Here, the point is that the disciples as light **are** to be seen...and seen for the purpose of directing those who see the beacon to the Father in heaven.

So what can we conclude? Just this. “The salt and light sayings (of Jesus) picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is to salt and shining is to light.”⁸ If you claim to live a Christian life, if you strive to fulfill your baptismal covenant, then you are actively working for the mission of Jesus. Not for yourself. Not for what you get. Not for what you want or even need. You are not a consumer, with demands to be met. You are a servant. You work for Jesus. Period. End of sentence.

“For salt, being salty is not optional...(and the disciples) do not generate the light any more than salt generates its own saltiness. The metaphors picture the church as having-been-lit, recipients of a light from which God is the

⁵ The Interpreter’s Bible, (1951) Volume 7, pages 288 – 289.

⁶ Op cit (New Interpreter’s Bible) page 182

⁷ See “New Interpreter’s Bible” for this phrase.

⁸ New Interpreter’s Bible, page 182.

source. They have been lit not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the world.”⁹ They are salt, not for their own sake, but for the world.

This church, lives in the middle of the City, a City that is crying out for redemption, and we heed the call. It may not be popular, but here we are. We may not be a church in the suburbs with plenty of parking and plenty of hangers on, so the room is always full. We may not be “popular”, but here we are, reaching out to homeless and the hungry. Reaching out to the University that surrounds us. Reaching out to the poor in Belize.

And, can I just add...we are serving our own people by connecting them to what really matters. It is not easy, I get that. It will make your life harder, actually, but at the same time, truer. More full of meaning. Because, we don't have to go looking for Jesus at 8 North Laurel Street. He is all around us. And Jesus breaks through our self-absorption and leads us to the truth. Jesus is easier to see here, than in some other places. He is for me, at any rate. That's why I am here, as your priest.

You are salt. You are light. We are salt and light together as we single mindedly follow the Lord. Let us pray that we stay pure. That we do not hide the fire in us that God has lit. Let us pray that we bring life, zest, purpose, love and justice to light so that God may receive the glory he is due.

This is who we are, in God's grace. This is who we are at Grace and Holy Trinity Church. And he made us this for the world. And I am sure you have noticed, the world desperately needs us to be what God has made us to be. I, for one, and happy to be here, right here, in the middle of the City, with no parking and the poor at our doorsteps. I am happy to be here. I trust you are too. I know you are too. All the rest can just melt away. This is a gospel church, plain and simple. Amen.

⁹ ibid page 182