

You are the salt of the earth

Matthew 5:13-16

February 8, 2026

The heart of our nation is hardening. The soul of our nation is rotting.

Three weeks ago, five-year-old Liam Ramos was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Minneapolis along with his father and taken to a detention facility in Texas, thirteen hundred miles away from his home and his mother. Liam and his father were returned to Minneapolis this week after a judge ordered their immediate release, but the administration is strongly considering an appeal and is pursuing an expedited deportation of both father and son.

Maher Tarabishi has been held in ICE custody since October, separated from his severely disabled son, thirty-year-old Wael, for whom Maher is sole caregiver, functioning virtually as his son's arms, legs, and lungs. Deprived of his father's care, Wael died on January 23. Maher was refused permission to attend his son's funeral.

While protesting and filming the strong-arm tactics of ICE agents in Minneapolis and after coming to the assistance of a woman being assaulted by agents, Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse, was pepper-sprayed and shoved to the ground. Lying on the ground, disarmed, Alex Pretti was shot multiple times by federal officers. His ensuing death has been ruled a homicide.

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Trusted allies — Canada, Britain, France, Denmark — are being callously antagonized, while perennial antagonist Russia and human rights pariah Saudi Arabia — the Saudi Arabia where journalists are murdered and women stifled, the Saudi Arabia that was the breeding ground for the 9/11 hijackers — Russia and Saudi Arabia are treated warmly as trusted allies.

We are removing artifacts from museums, stripping signs from national parks, editing school curricula and repurposing holidays, all in an unsubtle attempt to rewrite history and discredit science, all to disown our nation's sins and to disclaim any responsibility for addressing the perilous and grave consequences of those sins.

And as we approach our nation's two-hundred and fiftieth birthday, these three truths predominate: greed is celebrated, compassion is scorned, and justice is immaterial.

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What can we do? What do we need?

We need salt. We need light. We need you. Jesus said: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

Salt and light. It is an interesting pairing. Salt comes from below, light from above, salt from the ground, light from the sky. Light is visible, or, more correctly, light makes other things visible. Everybody can see the light. Everybody can see by the light. But salt is invisible, or, at least, salt works invisibly. You don't see salt doing its job, but salt is just as essential to life as light.

We need light: guiding, illuminating, informing, warming, photosynthesizing, adorning. And we need salt: purifying, preserving, enhancing, stabilizing, metabolizing, spicing. We need salt. We need light. We need you. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

You are the light of the world. In Greek it is: *Υμεις εστε το φως του κοσμου*. The Greek word “cosmos” refers to the world of nations and cultures, arts and sciences, religions and politics and economies, the world of human life and human institutions, the way we humans exist in relationship to each other and to the all other animate and inanimate things and to our creator.

You are light in this world. You reveal to this world who God is and what God wants by what you say and by what you do. “No one has ever seen God,” John wrote in his gospel, but “[Jesus Christ] has made God known.” And now we do.

Light is the tool of the prophet, the seer, the see-er. Light is revealing, searching out all the dark corners of human societies and human souls, showing everything as it is, both the beauty and the ugliness. Light is exposing, not allowing lies to go unchallenged. And light is comforting, dispelling the shadows that breed fear and uncertainty and doubt, pointing a way ahead, resurrecting hope.

We need light. If you can't see it, you can't fix it, or even know that it needs fixing. And if you can't see a way ahead, why even bother to try?

We need light and we do have light. Jesus said you are the light. He did not say you must try to be the light, but that you are the light. You cannot not be what you are. You are the light. The light that is in Jesus, the light that is Jesus, has been planted in you and the darkness can never put it out.

You cannot not be the light, but you can throw a blanket over yourself. You can put the lamp under a bushel basket instead of out in the open on a lampstand. You must simply let this little light of yours shine — by telling the truth, by celebrating beauty and calling out ugliness, by pointing a way ahead

instead of merely grumbling about how bad things are. You must simply let the light shine so that others will see, not see you, but see because of you, see what it is that you reveal and so give glory to God, because it is God that will be revealed to them. You are the light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth. In Greek it is: *Υμεις εστε το αλας της γης. της γης* — of the earth. “Cosmos” refers the world of thought and action, but “ge” refers the ground, the dust, the earth on which we stand, the earth from which we are made. We need to see, but we also need to be. And we cannot be without salt.

You are the salt of the earth. Salt was prized in Jesus’ world. In a world without refrigeration, salt was essential to food preservation and thus to survival. Salt was a symbol of value and of endurance because salt does not spoil, salt does not break down. Salt lasts, as it is, basically forever. And so, the Hebrew scriptures talk about a “covenant of salt,” meaning metaphorically an agreement, a promise, that is unbreakable. Salt itself was often used in covenant-making ceremonies. And we know now how vital salt (sodium) is to human metabolism: essential to nerve function, to muscle function, to maintaining fluid balances, to maintaining blood pressure. What is pumped through a hospital IV? Saline solution.

You are the salt of the earth, essential to survival, a symbol of God’s unbreakable promises, vital to maintaining balance in the social and political arena. You are the salt of the earth, not merely showing who God is by your words and by your actions, but manifesting God’s presence in your very being.

If light is the tool of the prophet, salt is the tool of the servant: unpretentious, often unseen, its work mundane, repetitive, and often thankless. The human body does not store sodium for long, so salt in the body must be continually replenished. The world of your neighbors is the body, and you are the salt.

Salt maintains the equilibrium of bodily fluids and pressures simply by being present. You help prevent a descent into extreme polarization and social destabilization simply by being present.

Salt prevents foods from rotting simply by being present. You help the soul of our nation from rotting simply by being present.

Salt spices food up, bringing out its flavors, making it more palatable, more delectable, simply by being added to the mix. You help bring beauty and pizzazz to the life of this world simply by being added to the mix.

We need salt and we do have salt. Jesus said you are the salt. Jesus did not say you must try to be salt, but you are salt. You cannot not be what you are. You are salt and you are going to go on being salt for as long as you live.

You cannot not be salt, but Jesus does include a warning against salt losing its flavor. Now biblical commentators have had a wild time trying to figure out just what Jesus meant by this, because the truth is salt cannot lose its flavor! Some have suggested this is precisely Jesus' point, that what has been planted in us by Jesus is as incorruptible and indestructible as salt. That is wonderfully encouraging, isn't it? And it is true. There is nothing that can ever take away the saltiness of the spirit of Jesus that has been poured into us and has become one with us.

And, yet, Jesus' warning remains. Just as you can't turn off the light, but you can hide the light, in the same way, you can't stop being salt, but the salt can ... well, the term Jesus uses literally means "become foolish." If salt becomes foolish, insipid, bland, innocuous, harmless, careless, apathetic, without passion, without pizzazz, without what it is that makes it what it is, then it is worthless. Salt is what it is simply by being present, but we can choose not to be present.

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It is a fact, but we need not despair. There is light to reveal the truth and to show us a way ahead. There is salt to slow the rotting and stem the chaos. You are the light, Jesus said. You are the salt, Jesus said. Who and what you are does not come from yourself, it comes from Jesus — that is what makes it genuine and lasting — but it is irrevocably, undeniably, absolutely who and what you are.

This is the message from Jesus I want you to hear today, that in the face of all there is to make us tremble and lose hope and cry out in anguish, it matters that you are here. It matters that you are.

Simply be being, simply by going about your daily business — praying and gathering at the table, making meals and making friends, listening to sermons and listening to music, reading the news and reading a good book, planting a seed in the ground and planting a seed in another's heart and mind — simply by being present, simply be being, you matter.

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