

THE SERMON SUPPLY



A Resource from
Region 6



Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, Lectionary 5, Year A

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Gospel Text - Matthew 5:13-20

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[Jesus said:] 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. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

SERMON TEXT:

There is an ancient saying in Arabic which translates into English as "there is salt between us." This saying is an expression of friendship and gratitude that comes from sharing a meal, but also celebrates the ways that friendships endure throughout time and are blessings to those who share in these relationships. This is not unique to the Arab world, cultures throughout the world utilize salt as a form of blessing on a new baby, a new home, as a sign of welcome for guests, and in religious rituals.

In the Hebrew scriptures, salt is an element in the sealing of sacrificial covenants. In Leviticus, chapter 2, verse 13, the Lord commands that salt be added to grain offerings. Further, in Numbers chapter 18 verse 19, we hear these words, "All the sacred gifts that the Israelites set aside for God I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for all time. It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before God for you and for your offspring as well."

Jewish Rabbis have noted that salt is an important piece of the sacrificial covenants between God and Israel because of the role salt plays in preserving food. Just as salt can prolong the shelf life of food and was a vital preservative in the ancient world, so salt is invoked in covenants so that they may not only endure, but remain healthy.

“You are the salt of the earth” Jesus says.

After having completed the beatitudes, Jesus continues with his teaching in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. And while the subject changes, it's not terribly unrelated. For in the beatitudes, we find these series of unconditional blessings for those who have no hope or joy left, those who get trampled upon by others, and those who are denied justice. And there is also blessing pronounced for the merciful, those who forgive with all they have, those who seek peace, and those who are made looked down upon and mocked for not turning away from the work of the gospel. These are not conditional blessings, they are promises of unconditional love and mercy.

In what follows we have a continuation of these promises. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. These promises of blessing, that begin in the beatitudes, continue here.

For Jesus' first hearers, this was probably welcome news. Professor Richard Swanson notes that, in addition to being familiar with salt's role in covenants, Jesus' audience would have also known about an earlier reference to being salt that pertained to the Jewish peoples that had been taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC. These individuals were lost to history, dissolved into the land and the cultures that they were taken to when they were removed from their homes in Israel. However,

these and many other Jews throughout the world are remembered as those who are scattered and hidden, but who have remembered the basics of the laws of Torah. They are salt, preservers of the world, for in observing Torah, their communities have become gentler and individuals becomes kinder - the world is made better.

To be preservers of the world is part of the blessing of being made to be salt. You see, when God gave the laws of Torah to Moses, the Israelites were just beginning their journey through the wilderness. They were just beginning to figure out who they were and what God was calling them to do and to be as people who no longer lived in the bonds of slavery in Egypt. And these laws, some a little weirder than others, helped them to live better in community with one another. And it helped them to remember that they were all children of the same God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, who promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, who bid them to care for the orphan and widow, welcome the alien, the refugee, and the stranger, feed the hungry, to care for one another as family.

Jesus tells us we are salt. Made in the image of God and called to be preservers of this beautiful world that God created, proclaimed was very good, and placed into our care, and this includes caring for one another so that our communities endure and maintain health.

Jesus tells us that we are also light, which takes on a unique meaning in our current American context. When John Winthrop, a leader of the Massachusetts bay colony, told his fellow settlers "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us," his words made an impact that have carried throughout our nation's history, even though history tells us that we have had a very hard time living into what that actually means. Though Jesus says we are light in the same breath that he says that to Christ followers of all other nations, there are some in this nation who claim we have a particularly unique claim on that title, because of Winthrop's words...and those tend to be the same people who also are having the hardest time living into being light.

Shining a light of God's truth into the shadowy places and calling things what they are sounds well and good, the difficult task is living into it because it means challenging the ways that empires work, breaking down systems that oppress, and naming God's truth that every human being is a part of the same family and is loved and precious in the sight of their creator.

But that is the call of these texts, this sermon on the mount:

We are blessed so that we can go out into the world to be a blessing.

We are salt so that we can add flavor to our communities and be preservers of the world by loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We are light so that we can shine that light into the places around us that are mired in shadows so that all people would know the love and mercy of God.

I like to call the sermon on the mount discipleship 101 - For Peter and Andrew and James and John, this is their very first lesson after they dropped their nets and accepted Jesus invitation to come and follow.

And what we learn in discipleship 101 is first we must know - we must know that, no matter what else the world may say, God has, is, and will bless us. Jesus wants us to be certain that God's love for us is so real that he blesses us without any action on our part and this blessing is not something that we can lose.

And the second part is that we must take this knowledge and do something about it. We are blessed, we are salt, we are light - how then are we, the blessed, the salt, and the light, to use these gifts to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves? A broad reaching answer is that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who healed the sick, proclaimed blessing to those whom the world would rather not bless, and who laid down his life for his friends.

The more specific part of the answer, the how we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, I leave to you to ponder because we all have different gifts and talents and callings by which we can live into our identities as salt and light.

But this can be our common prayer – May God give us the attention span and willingness to hear God calling. May God give us the wisdom to know what to do and when to do it and when it is time to just take a seat and listen. May God help us to perceive the world as God intends us to. And May God give us the courage to live boldly and act boldly for the sake of God’s kingdom.

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