

**Sunday, February 2, 2020**  
**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)**  
Isaiah 58.1-12; Matthew 5.13-20  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“YOU Are the Salt of the Earth”**

“You are the salt of the earth” (Mt 5.13a). “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5.14a). What do these two things—salt and light—have to do with each other? One is a chemical compound and the other is a form of electromagnetic radiation. Very different things. Yet, in Jesus’ mind, they apparently have something in common. Something that ties in with the first part of the Sermon on the Mount that he had just preached. You know, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . . blessed are those who mourn . . . blessed are the meek . . . blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . blessed are the merciful . . . blessed are the pure in heart . . . blessed are the peacemakers . . . blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake . . . blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you” (Mt 5.3-11).

The fact that Jesus shifts gears—and metaphors—to “you are the salt of the earth” and “you are the light of the world” must somehow tie in with the whole subject of blessedness. With what it means to be blessed. Or more likely, what it means to be a blessing. Having just defined—or redefined—what it means to be blessed, Jesus offers the images of salt and light to further illustrate the meaning of faithful discipleship. How those who follow him can and are blessed because they are a blessing to those he has just identified—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and so on.

While salt and light seemingly have little to do with each other, our understanding of what Jesus intended through the light of the world comment can actually, pardon the pun, shed some light on what he meant by the salt of the earth comment.

So let’s start with light. We know that we need light in order to see. The images we see with our human eyes are made possible by the reflection of light from the surfaces of objects, which is then received by the eye which are registered by optic nerves, and processed by the brain. In the simplest sense, light enables things to be seen as they are. Light, in a sense, exposes the true nature or qualities of what is being viewed.

Undoubtedly, Jesus’ reference to us being the light of the world would have had a much deeper meaning to his original audience—calling to mind oracles of the Prophet Isaiah. One of which we heard today in our Old Testament reading. This passage, written shortly after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, was in response to the people being concerned, even disturbed, by the fact that their fasting rituals did not seem to be effective. That their fasting did not seem to be pleasing to God, did not evoke the response they had hoped for. In the oracle that we heard in today’s Old Testament reading, God reminds the people that mere outward observance—going through the motions—is no substitute for the true meaning and purpose of ritual fasting.

After embarking on a careful analysis of righteous versus unrighteous behaviors surrounding fasting, the prophet proclaims God’s judgment of the people for engaging in worship practices

meant to be pleasing to God, all the while continuing in their unjust social practices. God issues an indictment against the people that their worship practices—namely fasting—were not being done for the right reasons—for the goodness and healing of the world—but rather for manipulative, self-serving purposes, namely to garner God’s favor.

God continues: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?” (Is 58.6-7). God describes the behaviors that he prefers over ritual fasting. That the people are not to fast just for the sake of fasting, just to elicit God’s pleasure. Rather, true fasting involves repenting of their self-centeredness and corruption and turning to God. The fast that is pleasing to God, that is required by God, is characterized by genuine self-denial and humility that brings justice, liberation, and acts of mercy to those of particular concern to God. Genuine fasting is meant to be a sign of solidarity with those who lack food and other necessities through no fault of their own. And that out of that solidarity with the hungry, the homeless, and the naked, they are to then do something about these injustices. That true fasting is a sacramental sign, resulting in acts of justice, such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked.

The oracle continues. If they do these things, if they act to correct the injustices of society, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn” (Is 58.8). True worship, truly righteous communal life, is like a light shining in the darkness. For those who are hungry or homeless or naked, the resulting acts of kindness that embody justice are truly as a light shining in the darkness of their lives.

The Prophet’s oracle and all that is behind it provides the background for the portion of the Sermon on the Mount we hear today. In which Jesus reiterates the Prophet’s call to justice and the meaning behind the metaphor of light that God used to describe those who truly seek to do his will by acting justly.

Now let’s move on to salt. Sodium chloride. We know that salt has important properties and uses. So important that in ancient times, salt was considered to have significant value. Roman soldiers were often paid in salt—or in Latin *sal*, the root of our term salary. So what are the valuable properties of salt that could remotely denote a blessing?

Of course, we know that salt is often used as a preservative, such as in curing meats like bacon. And those who cook know that salt is a common ingredient in virtually every recipe—both savory and sweet—used to add flavor, but more importantly to enhance or bring out the true flavor of the other ingredients.

Salt is also important and necessary for the proper functioning of the body. Salt is contained in our blood, lymph fluid, and extracellular fluids. In fact, salt is necessary for most metabolic processes, helping our body regulate fluids and being essential to digestive and cardiovascular functions. We cannot live without a certain amount of salt in our diet.

And historically, salt has served an important purpose in nearly all religions. It was an acceptable offering to Greek gods. It was used in Egyptian burial rites, being an essential element in the mummification process. For our Jewish ancestors, salt had a twofold purpose. First, it was a symbol of the covenant between God and his people. Serving as a reminder of the covenant that will never spoil. And second, salt was a part of Jewish temple sacrifices. As prescribed in Leviticus: “You shall not omit from your grain-offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Lev 2.13).

We can look at all these qualities and characteristics of salt and apply them to the concept of righteous living outlined in Isaiah, which itself is characterized as being as a light breaking forth—being the light of the world.

“You are the salt of the earth” as an expression of covenant – As the salt of the earth, we express and affirm our part in the covenant with God by working for justice, compassion, and mercy for all God’s people. This is particularly expressed by seeking to care for those who are of particular concern to God: the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the poor, the widowed and orphaned, the marginalized. In so doing, we not only show solidarity with them, we also show solidarity with and commitment to God and God’s purposes.

“You are the salt of the earth” as sacrifice – To sacrifice has two meanings. One is an offering to God as a sign of praise, thanksgiving, or petition. The other is more personal, as in a loss or the destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else. As the salt of the earth, we do both. We give of our own time and our personal resources as an offering to the one in need, which is also an offering to God. In so doing, we accept a personal loss of those resources to our own use, so that someone else may benefit from them. Perhaps more than we would actually benefit from them.

“You are the salt of the earth” as preserving and being necessary to life – These two go hand in hand, at least as related to salt as a metaphor for Christian service and ministry. As the salt of the earth, our gifting of our resources to help others can quite literally be life-giving to the one in need. And also metaphorically life-giving, as our recognition of the one in need as a sister or brother, as one worthy of dignity and respect, affirms their inherent value and demonstrates that they are loved by us, and particularly by God.

“You are the salt of the earth” as enhancing life – As the salt of the earth, our actions, our gift of ourselves, serve to enhance the lives of those we minister to. And in so doing, our own lives of faith are enhanced as we fulfill the ministries to which we are called, as we more fully live into who God is calling us to be as his faithful servants.

To be the light of the world, we reflect the light of Christ shining in our own lives. And we do this by being the salt of the earth, seeking to live into our calling to be his hands and heart in the world in ways that are nurturing, enhancing, and life-giving to those we are called to minister to. In ways that prove to be a blessing to those we minister to. And in so doing, we ourselves are nurtured, enhanced, and given life. And yes, in being the light of the world, in being the salt of the earth, we, too, are blessed.