

Sunday, February 8, 2026
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)
Matthew 5.13-20
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Blessing of Salt and Light”

Last week we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus’ inaugural sermon, and one in which he essentially lays out his vision for his ministry, as well as some of the central teachings that will guide that ministry. Or, more accurately, teachings that will guide those who seek to follow him, those who will engage in ministry with him. In the portion we heard last Sunday, the Beatitudes, Jesus talks about being blessed. Through the Beatitudes, he presents a confounding and counterintuitive assessment of what it means to be blessed. He makes a statement about who is already blessed, not a proclamation of how to get and keep God’s blessing, be it for ourselves or for others. On the contrary, Jesus is saying the most important thing about divine blessing is that it already is. It has been graciously given. And not just in those places and circumstances we would expect. It is also given—it is especially given—in those places and circumstances that may seem to us far from being blessed. That we receive blessing as pure gift, not as something to be earned, not as a reward for good behavior or right action. As pure gift.

In redefining blessing and blessedness, Jesus is proclaiming that no matter who we are, we are blessed by God—even if we don’t always feel it. The Beatitudes are meant to be words of comfort, consolation, and encouragement to all of us. And that in being blessed, we are assured that the kingdom of heaven is already open to us and that we are a part of it. As such, we are invested in the work of that kingdom.

Which brings us to today’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Before Jesus launches into the remainder of the sermon with teachings on a variety of topics, today he provides several images of encouragement as to what it means to be blessed, to be part of the kingdom of God, to be invested in the work of the kingdom, to actually engage in that work. All leading up to, being preparation for, the more practical instructions of what that work entails. Making more explicit the scope of what it means to be blessed. Of how one lives into and out of the blessedness bestowed on us by God. Jesus primarily does this through two images: “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.”

These two images—you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world—at once declare our purpose and our role as those who are blessed by God; as those who seek to demonstrate that blessedness, to share that blessedness, through our lives and ministries. With Jesus effectively saying, “God has made you and blessed you for a particular purpose, for a particular role, in the building of God’s kingdom.”

The first of these images is that of salt. You are the salt of the earth. As anyone who enjoys eating or cooking knows, salt is a seasoning. Salt adds flavor. And while the actual flavor of salt is sometimes desired, the real benefit of salt is that it enhances flavor. Salt is one of the only spices that can help to bring out and highlight the natural flavors in a dish. This is why salt is used in most recipes, even in sweets. And the amazing thing is that, when used in cooking, salt

can make a difference even in very small quantities. Just a pinch can bring a dish's flavors to life, making all the difference.

The second of the images Jesus uses is that of light. You are the light of the world. The benefits of light are likewise obvious to us. Light brings, well, light into darkened and shadowy places. Literally shining forth to make what is in darkened and shadowy places visible. Making it easier for us to see. Making it easier for us to do the things we need to do in such places. And like salt, it is amazing how just a little light can make a huge difference. Just one small candle in a darkened room, strategically placed, can brighten the whole room. Just a small light can be seen at great distances. A recent study by scientists at Texas A&M University demonstrated that the light of a single candle can actually be seen by the naked eye up to 1.6 miles away.

You could make all sorts of analogies as to how we are salt and how we are light. As salt, how, by our presence and our actions, we can enhance the "flavor" of a situation. Bringing out and enhancing God's love through our presence. Providing the opportunity to enhance and bring out the good in others through our words or our actions. As light, how we can bring the light to Christ into a place where he has not been known. How we can bring the light of truth to shine upon a falsehood. How we can shine forth the light of God's love through our words and actions, allowing others to see God more clearly. How we can be a shining light, allowing those who may be lost to find their way through a dark situation. You get the idea. And, like so much of what Jesus offers us by way of images and analogies, it is really up to us to discern just how they apply in our own lives of faith. How do we serve as salt in our lives and ministries? How do we serve as light in our lives and ministries? And how might we more fully live into our purpose and role as salt, as light?

This was the invitation that Jesus was issuing to those gathered to hear the Sermon on the Mount. Helping them to recognize that they are blessed, that because they are blessed they have a part in God's kingdom, and how they can use that blessedness in their own lives and in the ongoing work of God's kingdom. That the saltiness and the light are inherent to who they are. There is nothing they need to do to obtain salt, to obtain light. They have those qualities, those abilities, by virtue of being blessed; by virtue of being beloved children of God. The real task is to figure out how to use the salt, how to shine the light.

To help in this task, Jesus follows his comments about "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world" with a statement about himself: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." As a teaser, a foreshadowing of what we will witness next week with the Transfiguration. But here, at the early stages of Jesus' public ministry, a statement of intent for his ministry moving forward. That despite what some may think, or what some may wish, Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets—a common image for the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, what has been presented in the Law of Moses, what has been foretold by the prophets, was leading to this point. Was leading to Jesus coming among us. Recognition that the law and the prophets continue to be God's vision for humanity and the eventual fulfillment of God's kingdom. Rather than abolish the work of previous millennia, Jesus has come to set things back on course. To get us back on the right track.

Something he further emphasizes by bringing the scribes and the Pharisees into the image presented: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the

Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Reference to the fact that over time, the Jewish leadership, particularly the Temple authorities, had strayed from following the law and the prophets. Or rather, they had a tendency to play fast and loose with it. The people were still required to follow the laws set forth in Scripture. The Temple authorities, however, not so much. Not that they necessarily broke the laws. They just had a different standard of how they were applied to themselves—often in ways that allowed them to benefit politically and economically on the backs of the poor and the marginalized. How many times does Jesus call them out, “You hypocrites!” Jesus effectively uses the example of the scribes and Pharisees as the poster children for how things need to change. How things needed to return to what God originally intended through the law and the prophets: righteousness. Right relationship with God and with one another.

In saying he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but rather to fulfill them, Jesus is stating emphatically what his whole ministry is based on: fulfilling the intent of Scripture through faithful living in accordance with Scripture. And in so doing, providing the foundation for his followers who are called to be the salt of the earth, who are called to be the light of the world. Inviting those called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world to live into those roles and purposes by likewise faithfully living in accordance with Scripture.

In broad strokes, being the salt of the earth means seeking to enhance the lives of those around us by living in accordance with Scripture. Being the salt of the earth means demonstrating the natural goodness of God’s creation and our part in it through our own example of what it means to live in accordance with Scripture. Being the salt of the earth means “spicing things up,” with a measure of God’s love. Being the light of the world means shining a light on the truth contained in Scripture. Being the light of world means being a beacon to guide others to find their way to right relationship with God and others as modeled by Jesus in faithful adherence to the intent of Scripture. Being the light of the world means showing God’s love in those places where it may be lacking.

You will notice that Jesus does not tell his followers, “You have to become the salt of the earth. You have to become the light of the world.” He says “You [already] are the salt of the earth. You [already] are the light of the world.” That is significant. We do not have to work to become salt, we do not have to work to become light—these are inherent parts of who we are as those created in the image and likeness of God. As those who are blessed by God. As those who are part of the kingdom of God. However, we do have to claim, to embrace, and to embody our purpose and role as salt, as light. That is what today’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount is about. Jesus invites us to follow his example to fulfill who we are created and called to be. To live into the fullness of right relationship with God and with one another. Just as salt and light are small things that can make a big difference to the larger whole—enhancing, enlightening—God has made each of us, small though we may feel, as his creation, as members of his kingdom, with the potential, with the power, to make a big difference in the world around us. Like a pinch of salt, we can enhance and enrich the lives of those around us. Like a single candle, we can shine with the brightness of God’s love, illuminating the world around us with God’s truth, helping guide others to experience God’s love for themselves. Those are certainly no small things, particularly when they serve to further extend God’s blessings.