

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
5 February 2023**

Matthew 5:13-20

We live in an image driven world. We are surrounded by images from the moment we wake up until we go to bed. We have images of what it means to be healthy, beautiful, powerful, successful, and religious. We see these images summarized in slogans that invite us to be “an army of one,” “have it our way,” and “Think different.” We use images and slogans to describe our strengths, our aspirations, our political positions, and our lifestyles. We say, “I am a fighter,” “I am a Rebel,” “I am a Christian,” “I am a soccer mom,” and “I am a Republican.” Our accomplishments show the world who we are and who we want to be. We say, “Heisman Trophy Winner,” “First Round Pick,” “Newsweek man of the year,” “Olympic Gold-Medal Winner,” “Academy award winner,” etc.

Within the church we also have labels and images that tell the world who we are and who we are attempting to be. We often hear of churches described as a “World-Changing,” “Congregational,” “Sacramental,” “Missionary,” “Charismatic,” “High Church,” “Low Church,” etc. Each one of these labels qualifies who we are and sets us apart, making us more appealing to a certain constituency. In today’s Gospel Jesus uses a powerful label and several word-pictures to describe who the disciples are and should be. These labels apply as much to them as they do to us today. Let me set the stage: We are still in the “Sermon of the Mount,” which began in chapter 5:1. The Gospel passage for last week was Matthew 5:1-10, what we traditionally call The Beatitudes. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... etc.” In other words, Jesus declares “Blessed” those the world had declared “worthless and cursed”. He reverses the theology of hundreds of years that attached poverty, infirmity, bareness, etc. to curses from God and punishment for sin, while riches, health, a large family, etc. were seen as blessings or rewards for a righteous life. Jesus instead blesses the humble and despised and claims that it is to these outcasts in particular that the kingdom of God belongs.

In the passage today, Jesus looks at this dispirited cast of characters and tells them, “You are the salt of the earth.” How can this be? These are nothing but a bunch of fishermen, farmers and housewives. How can they be salt? Salt in Palestine was associated with life itself. You need salt to survive, and life cannot be sustained without it. How can a motley crew like this one be a necessary ingredient to the very fabric of Palestinian life? This is an outrageous claim. It is an outstanding reversal in the way people are valued in this world. Whereas these men and women see themselves as victims of an oppressive regime, Jesus tells them they are salt to that world. And let me be very clear that the verbs in this passage are in the present tense. Jesus does not say, “Someday, when you clean up your act and go to seminary, you will be salt!” He does not say, “Someday after I reward your righteousness with wealth, prosperity and respectability,

you will be salt!” He says, “You are salt now. This very moment. This is your identity as a believer. This is who you are!” I am sure this caused the audience to pay attention.

In antiquity salt was used to *purify*, to *preserve*, and to *flavor* foods. Salt was added to water filters to purify water, was often put directly on wounds to prevent infection, and, when available, it was used to help launder clothes. The image of salt as purifier is also well known in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 2, the Prophet Elisha asked for a bowl of salt and, after praying for God’s intervention, poured the salt in a germ-infested lake, purifying it forever. The image of Israel being “salted” in fire, refined by God himself, is also a powerful metaphor from the OT. Now, Jesus is telling this group of followers that they are the salt that purifies their world, the agents of transformation and purification. In an era when there was no refrigeration, salt was used to preserve foods, especially meat and fish. This prevented deterioration and preserved the food for long times. Jesus now claims that this group of disciples are the agents of preservation; the antidote to decomposition, rotting away, and wastefulness. They are what allows the world to preserve its essence and its divine intent. They, and not just the powerful, are to help the world preserve the unchanging truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Salt was also used as a spice to add flavor to foods, to make them more interesting, to bring out flavors we could not otherwise get. Now, Jesus tells this group of disciples they are to spice up life, to bring out flavors the world would not have without them, to bring about the joy of Christ to a suffering world through the content of their hope and the reason for their faith. Jesus warns his disciples that the only way for salt to be an effective agent of purification, preservation, and flavoring is to retain its saltiness. Palestinian salt, which was taken mostly from marshes, could lose its saltiness if it was in prolonged contact with the ground, not stored properly, or not used promptly. Jesus makes it very clear that the mission of every Christian and the Church in general is threefold: First, we are to *purify the world*. Second, we are to *preserve the world*. And, third, we are to *add flavor to the world*. Another way to express this call to purify the world is by saying that the Church, and indeed every Christian, is called to be a prophet, constantly challenging the culture; constantly reminding the world of what’s truly important; and constantly advocating and living into an ethic of love and forgiveness, rather than an ethic of exploitation and dehumanization. We are to purify our world through our prophetic action and through the quality of our lives.

And this is important. Before we can salt the world, we have to be salt ourselves. In a real way, we have to become the change we seek in others and in the world. We have to let the Gospel of Christ purify our lives, so we can exercise our prophetic call with integrity and honesty. Many Christians are great at telling people what to do and how to do it. We are not so good at being the change we seek. The call to preserve the world is a call to remain rooted in the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the ever-changing philosophical and theological waves of our culture, the Church, and indeed every Christian, is called to preserve the only truth by which the world is saved, Jesus of Nazareth. If salt preserves the essence of foods and prevents deterioration, the Church as

salt must preserve the essence of the Christian proclamation, and resist the temptation to fall for the “doctrine of the day”, the “new thing”, the “new fad”, and the new “truths” of the culture. It is tempting to become more humanistic and more universalistic, but the church is called to become more faithful to Christ, more dependent on his grace, and more rooted on his message of salvation.

The call to be the flavor giver is none other than the call to bring Christ’s joy to the ends of the world. Only Christ can bring about change in the human heart and can add true flavor to our lives. Many try to replace Christ as the crucial ingredient that adds flavor to life. They replace him with two parts wealth, one part self-psychology, one part obsessive search for power and control, and two parts pleasure seeking. But all of you who are cooks know that there are ingredients that are irreplaceable. My friend Paula Dean and I believe there is no real substitute for butter! But, even if you found a worthy substitute for butter, there is no real substitute for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The natural flavors of the world lead to a sour taste in people’s mouths: The taste of rejection, betrayal, hopelessness, abandonment, and the taste of despair.

My friends, our saltiness is not natural to us. We don’t salt the world because we are so good that our goodness makes the world better. Our saltiness comes from Jesus of Nazareth. This is the saltiness that never loses its potency and its quality. Only Christ’s saltiness, the power of his Gospel endures forever. The Church cannot be the salt of the world apart from and separated from Christ. Without Christ there is very little we have to offer the world. The only way to be salt is to remain rooted in the source of all salt, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and the Source of all life.

Let us pray: Keep your church Lord from losing it’s saltiness and becoming insipid, that we may be prophets in a world that needs purification; proclaimers of your truth in a world in need of the Gospel; and bringers of your joy to a suffering world. In his holy name we pray. Amen!