

So this past Friday was the 10th anniversary of my ordination. And ordinarily, I'm not one for making a big deal about things like that, but I have to say that after 10 years, I'm feeling a sense of awe and honor to have served in the church as a pastor for 10 years. Not only because the number of people I graduated with who are still in pastoral ministry has greatly diminished, but also because the past 10 years have been a spiritual journey of becoming more and more aware of all that I don't know, while at the same time realizing just how incredibly faithful our God is. What I mean is that any growth, any success, any good thing I have done, it is all because of God's unwavering faithfulness. And that's an awesomely humble place to find yourself. For God's faithfulness, in spite of my own flaws and failures, I am deeply grateful.

But the reason I bring this up is because in reflecting on 10 years of ministry, I realize the true blessedness of Jesus' words here in Matthew 5. I mean, these words of Jesus are pure grace – they are blessings proclaimed, not blessings earned. And after 10 years of pastoral ministry, that truth is something I continue to grow in understanding and accepting. That the grace of Christ are truly not my own doing, but something given to us out of his pure, divine love for us. Because it's tempting to hear things like “You are salt of the earth” or “You are the light of the world” and turn them into aspirations – as though it is our task to become more salt-like or more light-filled. But that's missing the point. Jesus quite clearly states as a matter of fact, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world”. Already. Which means that this isn't an invitation to become, but an acknowledgment of what is already. You are salt and light. Right now. Without any effort or deservedness of our own. You are salt and light because God has declared it so.

But what does that actually mean? What does it mean that we are salt and light in the world? Some have said that it means we are “the spice of life”, which I'm not sure using metaphors to describe other metaphors is all that helpful. Others have drawn the conclusion that Jesus is calling us the “flavor enhancers” in the world or the “preservers of life” and again, I'm not sure what all of that really means or what it looks like. The thing is, there are plenty of images we can conjure up in our brains about what Jesus was saying by calling us salt and light. But in my study and exploration of several commentaries and discussions on this text, I have come to an important realization: I don't think Jesus is asking us to go this deep with the metaphors of salt and light. I don't think it's as complicated as we make it out to be.

So hear me out: Jesus is speaking here in the middle of his famous “Sermon on the Mount” – the same message that we had last week with the beatitudes. You know, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the persecuted, etc.” The point being that those who are often the least in the world, the ones we assume are the least likely to be blessed, in the Kingdom of God, they are blessed. Our text is a continuation of this same message. And so rather than try to think of all the hidden and mysterious meanings about salt and light, we

would do well to hear it in the same tone as the beatitudes that come just before these metaphors. What I'm saying is that perhaps in saying, “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world”, Jesus is reemphasizing what he has already stated – that you are blessed. That you are valuable. That you are worthy in the sight of God.

Because if we could make a list of the things that held value in the ancient world, that list would certainly include things like salt and oil. And what makes those things valuable is their ability to be steadfastly what they are created to be. Salt that is not salty is not salt. A lamp that does not burn is no longer a lamp. If either ceases to be what it is created to be, then it exists outside of its purpose. All of which is to say that I think the point Jesus is making here is that in the Kingdom of God, you are valued. You have value. You are valuable. And your value does not come from your achievement or success or goodness – it comes from the fact that God made you who are you. God made us human and we aren't being asked to be more than that.

I mean just for a moment consider what it would mean that Jesus affirms our value in the sight of God – that you and I can fully accept our humanity and the humanity of others because God accepts us in all of our humanness. What would it mean for us to marvel at who we are, to rejoice in who we are, to have joy in who we have been made to be? What would it mean to see our collective humanity, not as a detriment or an obstacle to be overcome, but as the very thing we are called to be in the world? I mean for starters, I think we'd be a little more loving and kind with one another. I think we'd be more forgiving and understanding and empathetic. I think we'd experience less stress and anxiety. Perhaps there would be less of a drive to boost ourselves up the proverbial social ladder. Perhaps we wouldn't feel the need to hoard resources. Perhaps we'd appreciate the layers and wonders of diversity that exists in our world. Perhaps we'd be less inclined to see others as them they and more as us and we.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I know that all may sound like pie in the sky, wish in one hand and you-know-what in the other. But let me ask to really consider what it would mean to live with the belief that the people you meet, the people you work with or go to school with, the people who are like you and the people who aren't like you – everyone – what would it mean to live as though they were valuable? As though you are valuable? Is there anything about our world that might change? I suspect a great deal would be different. And perhaps that's what Jesus is inviting us to be today. That after all the blessings of the beatitudes, there's just a few more things to say: you are salt and you are light. You are wonderfully who God made you to be. You are priceless in the sight of God. So let who God made you to be fill the world with joy and life. Shine a light on the value of others. Rejoice in the wonder of each and every being. Be the witness to God's good work among us so that all may see just how loving, just how caring, just how gracious, just how wondrous our God really is. Amen.