

Flavor and Flame

Matthew 5: 13-16

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Prayer: God of Light, shine your light upon us, so that we might shine as your lights in the world. Amen.

The Gospel reading today poses two fundamental questions: **Who are we?** and **What are we supposed to do now?** These aren't just academic questions. They lingered in Matthew's community—and they linger with us today. His church was living through a time of theological and social tension following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They were wrestling with what the future of the faith community would be and what it even meant to be "faithful" anymore.¹

Today, we feel that same shifting sand. Old values and practices are being tossed aside. Denominations are shrinking. And we find ourselves asking: In a world like this, how do we live as faithful followers of Jesus? What does it actually mean to be "the Church"?

Jesus answers us with two simple metaphors: **Salt and Light.**

First, he says, **"You are the salt of the earth."** Now, we often think of salt just as something for flavor, but salt has a much grittier job: **It is a preservative.**

Salt preserves food in a couple of ways. First, it acts like a sponge, pulling water out of the tiny cells of bacteria and mold until they can't survive. Second, it creates an environment that's simply too harsh for germs to survive. It doesn't just hide the decay—it stops the progression entirely.

We often hear people say today, "America has lost its soul." We heard it from Joe Biden during his campaign. From presidential biographer Jon Meacham, political commentator James Zimmerman, and, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., before them. What they mean is that the "spiritual glue"—the shared values and moral character that once gave our body politic its life—feels like it's evaporating. Without that soul, a community can

¹ Ronald J. Allen, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting On the Word*, Year A, vol. 1, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 335.

start to feel like just a group of individuals; a "tissue of cells" rather than a breathing body, a living organism.

For a long time—even with all our flaws and the injustices we've struggled to overcome—there was still a common thread that bound us together. We agreed on certain ideals: the promise of democracy, the hope of the American Dream, and a basic sense that we were one people, united in purpose. *E Pluribus Unum*. "Out of many, one," as our unofficial national motto goes.

But today, that story has fractured. Many feel that this shared story has split into two or more irreconcilable versions. When a people no longer agree on what is "true" or what their history means, it feels as though the "soul" or the unifying spirit of the country has evaporated.

This is exactly where Jesus meets us. When he calls us the "salt of the earth," he's asking us to step into that fracture. He wants us to make a difference—not with loud arguments, hostile debates, or the harsh confrontations we often see on the news, but through the quiet power of integrity. Being "salty" means speaking the truth and living with integrity. It's about trading manipulative conversation for honest connection. Perhaps, Billy Joel has a point when he sang,

*I don't want clever conversation
I never want to work that hard, hmmm
I just want someone that I can talk to
I want you just the way you are.*

Authenticity is our 'saltiness'—it's what makes our witness believable to the people who actually know us. As the old Billy Joel song suggests, we are all just looking for someone we can talk to who is simply "the way they are." When the church acts with this kind of integrity, we do more than just exist; we prevent society from losing its flavor and decaying. We season the world with a grace that proves we are present, we are honest, and we are invested in one another.

But when that saltiness is lost, as Jesus warns, when authenticity gives way to self-interest, the effects are felt far beyond the walls of the church. History shows us that when the church loses its moral clarity, society soon

feels the cost. Sadly, the American soul has been replaced by consumerist individualism. We've seen the shift from **"We" to "Me."** In many ways, we've drifted from a **covenant**—where we are responsible for one another—to a **contract**, where we only look out for ourselves. When the pursuit of personal wealth or political power outweighs the duty to the "common good," it can feel as if we have lost our **moral compass**.

So, as followers of Jesus, what does it mean to be the "salt of the earth" today? It means protecting what truly matters—even when it isn't popular. We are called to be a steady moral compass—a community where integrity is lived, not just talked about, and where the common good still matters.

Just as salt keeps food from spoiling, our presence can help keep our communities from sliding into cynicism or despair. We do this by holding fast to what is sacred and by offering a love and grace people can actually taste. In that way, we remind one another—and the world—that there is a better, truer way to live, and that it is still possible. As the late Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, wrote, our prophetic calling is to nourish a vision of life that refuses to be defined by the dominant culture, inviting others to see the world through the lens of God's alternative possibilities.²

But salt does even more. This time of year, we know salt is used to **melt the snow** so we can walk and drive safely. As Christians, we are called to be the salt that melts the "ice" of violence, bigotry, inhumanity, hate, and bitterness in the world, and sometimes in our own hearts.

And finally, salt **heals**. As the salt of the earth, we can help people heal from their wounds and traumatic experiences. Through prayer and a listening ear, we can help clear away the "infection" of resentment so that genuine healing can finally take root in people's lives.

Then Jesus shifts metaphors: He says, **"You are the light of the world."**

Light exists to **illumine**. It helps us see in the dark, guiding our path. In the same way, Jesus calls us to bring light into a world that is often dark and broken. That light is the gospel, drawing people in with its warmth and hope. From the very beginning, this has always been the heart of our

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

mission. Archbishop William Temple once said that the church is the only organization that exists primarily for people who are not its members.

Light doesn't decide where it will shine. It simply spreads, welcoming everyone—and that's a glimpse of God's reign. Like a city set on a hill, our light is meant to be seen by all.

But for that light to matter, we have to be willing to go where the darkness is. We have to step into places of pain and injustice, trusting that the light of the gospel is stronger than any shadow.

"You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

As the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus wants us to make a difference in the world.

Here is the thing about salt and light: **Neither one exists for itself.** Salt is useless if it stays in the shaker—and we all know that. A lamp does no good if it's hidden under a bucket. They only fulfill their purpose when they are used—when they are poured out.

May we be a people who are poured out for the world. Thanks be to God.
Amen.