



Sunday Sermon
February 8, 2026
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Epiphany V

Matthew 5: 13-20

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. **AMEN.***

The chemist knows it as NaCl, sodium chloride. Physiologists tell us that it is vital for nerve and muscle function. Any athlete learns that drinking it with water will help relief cramps. And yet, my doctor has told me for decades to watch how much I use.

In our lives, it is everywhere: on our tables, in the kitchen, in the sea just to the south, on the roads when it snows, salt is just a part of our lives. Nevertheless, and this may just be me, but when Jesus says in our gospel that we are to be salt and light, I gloss over the seeming inscrutable call to be salt and abide in the more comfortable and customary notion to be light.

Being light, resonates with our presuppositions of goodness in culture. We want to be enlightened. We enjoy a light-hearted evening with friends. We are always grateful to see light at the end of a tunnel. In our time and culture, salt gets mixed reviews. It is not just the doctor and the chef that seem to see it differently. We take things with a grain of salt, or someone pours salt into old wounds. Salty language seldom is used to compliment. And when we say we are going back to the salt mines, we are not too happy about our work.

To our contemporary Christian understanding, the image of being light seems easier to embrace. It sounds about right. We can be those who join with Jesus in casting away darkness. We can be warriors of justice.

But to be salt? It is so tempting to move on to more comfortable language and metaphor. But Jesus began his inaugural teaching not with a call to be light but to first be salt: "You are salt of the earth." And if the notion of being salt strikes us as a bit odd, what Jesus says next is, well confusing, even disquieting, "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." I found these words of Jesus harsh. Every so often, when scripture is vexing, frustrating, or irritating, therein also can be found what the spirit is saying to God's people.

Those words, "good for nothing," I know them. I remember hearing a voice telling me that I was good for nothing. Sometimes from another person, but sometimes the voice was my own. All

too often political leaders use using similar words for immigrants, first nations persons, people of different races and religions. Too many voices and too many deeds shouting someone is damaged goods...something to be thrown out. In our relationships, our work life, our own self-evaluation, we hear that voice...so many words. My struggle with this verse is that the Jesus I know does not say that about anyone. But doesn't it sound like he is telling us to be salt of the earth - or else?

And so, I puzzled even more over salt. I knew from a scientific perspective that salt does not lose its saltiness. If a compound thought to be salt does not have the preserving or taste qualities of salt, then sodium chloride is not present. While Jesus and his disciples were not chemists in the modern sense, these ancients knew their salt and how it was acquired. Ancient salt was inherently less pure than the salt we know. Jesus would have seen the shallow salt basins along the Dead Sea or the Mediterranean. Palestinian salt was impure, brown, with magnesium, and calcium sulfate left from the evaporative process.

What is Jesus trying to tell his disciples...what is he trying to tell us? Unlike our world, pure white salt did not exist in his time. Saltiness was always a matter of degree, not perfection. No pure salt...no perfect salt...just like people. As I made that connection, I occurred to me that Jesus was not judging us for not being salty enough. What if rather Jesus wasn't talking about consequences but present reality?

If we invert the two statements in the verse, things become so much clearer:

But if salt has lost its taste how can its saltiness be restored? *And you have. You are no longer good for anything, but will be thrown under foot. That is what we'll do!*

No! Don't listen to them. You are the salt of the earth.

Some will say that I am taking liberties, but that is what gospel tellers then and now do: they tell the good news in their time and place. And so I offer to you that Jesus is saying, I know this is the way the world sees you. It is the way that the powerful see the powerless, the rich the poor, the privileged those who have no rights. They think you have lost your saltiness. They think you are missing something. And so you can be thrown out!

That is an insidious lie. No, no, no - You are salt of the earth. Jesus might have added, and we all know, that salt is so valuable to preserve things, to heal wounds, to add zest and flavor. So do you. As a child of God that is your essence, you have the image of God stamped upon your being. You are of inestimable value. Please don't let them tell you otherwise ... You are salt of the earth. Period. Full stop.

Well, not totally full stop. Because as I noted earlier, Jesus doubles down on his blessing with the more familiar metaphor, "You are the light of the world." And what follows that acclamation is a word of encouragement, "let your light shine before others."

In the 1980s, there was a television show called St. Elsewhere which told stories of an aging, run-down inner-city Boston hospital. You may have seen it on CBC. I don't recall watching

it regularly, but I remember one show quite vividly. With the gift of the internet, I found the episode to refresh my memory. (1)

Father Joseph McCabe, the hospital's founding priest, has left his twilight ministry and returned to St. Eligius Hospital to die. He has ALS and is paralyzed. In the first scene, he is embittered by his disease. He can no longer celebrate the Eucharist. He calls himself God's "cursed servant with a cogent mind and a wrecked body."

Later, Father McCabe is wheeled into a solarium where an autistic boy is receiving therapy. Just as the priest enters, the boy loses control, throws a ball through a window breaking it and begins to strike an orderly with his fists. A 90-year-old priest and a young boy are hearing the same voices: you are not good for anything. You are discarded.

But in this solarium, after all a room of light, something shifts...and different words are spoken and heard. The priest gently says, "Tommy lad...come to me lad. The boy slowly does and then reaches out and begins touching the old priest's face as if he is reading him like a blind man reads brail but slowly, caressing. Father McCabe says to him, "God love ya." The boy's hand lingers upon the priest's lips. The priest lightly kisses the hand and Tommy returns the same hand to his own lips. Ah, the kiss of peace! God love ya...you are salt...you are light.

Dearly Beloved, the other voices will continue their cacophony of vile nonsense and cutting, vicious words. They are not true. You are salt...through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ, you preserve creation. You flavour those who you touch with the seasoning of holy love. You are light. You give warmth to a world that can too often be so cold. Let your light so shine that darkness falls away.

And here I leave you with a playful extension of Jesus' salt metaphor. This community and every Christian community are a like that salt bed where we come together to bake in the warmth of the Son, to be drawn out as the salt of the earth that is our true essence. However, we do not remain there. In our dismissal at the end of the service, we are poured out upon the world around us as if by a divine saltshaker. You are salt ... season ... love ... heal ... preserve. Be salt...and never forget to remind everyone you touch...God love ya...you are the salt of the world.

[St. Elsewhere, Season 5, Episode 1](#)