

The Outward, Inward Journey
A Sermon on Matthew 5:13-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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The abundant life made known to us in Christ is rich and complex. We spend years seeking to learn and understand it. Over and over, we return to a place where we feel close to God, hoping our lives would be shaped by God's love. Let's consider one of the rich parts of the Good News; our journey with God has a strong outward direction and also a strong inward direction.

The outward direction is highlighted in today's Gospel reading. Jesus was addressing a large crowd of his disciples. In Matthew's account, he had just finished the first portion of the Sermon on the Mount, called "The Beatitudes", concluding with these verses: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

A few verses later, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." The main point is that the church does not exist for itself. The church must have a strong outward direction. Even in situations where we are reviled, and where others are uttering all kinds of evil against us, Jesus' disciples are to bring God's light to the world.

Jesus' intention is to bring goodness and salvation to the great masses of people. Though we often gather in relatively small groups, Jesus was not addressing the needs of a select, esoteric group of disciples. Jesus was concerned with the needs of all people: rich and poor, highly educated and illiterate, the weak and the strong.

Jesus says, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.* One does not turn on a lamp, and then spend their time gazing at the light bulb. We turn on the lamp so we can see what is in front of us more clearly. The church exists to help all the people of the world see the truth more clearly. The church is dedicated to the task of bringing more truth to the world, even as that truth is rejected by those with power in the world.

The light we bring to the world does not come from us, it is God's light. A wise preacher once said, "We preach the good news which is not us." Matthew's Jesus emphasizes the focus is not on us a few verses later. At the beginning of chapter six, Jesus says, "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them."

To paraphrase St. Paul, we do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim the light of Christ. This requires transparency from us. We are trying to be like a clean piece of glass, so the light of Christ can shine through. We clean some of the dirt and mud from that piece of glass when we set aside some of our sinful behaviors, the results of our pride, envy, anger, fear, and greed.

The church brings the light of Christ when our processes and decision-making are transparent. We bring the light of Christ when we follow Jesus' example of seeking and telling the truth. We bring the light of Christ when we are willing to be proven wrong. The church brings the light of Christ when we acknowledge mistakes we have made.

So our journey with God has a strong outward direction. Like Jesus, we engage with the world for the sake of others, not for our own honor or gain. We are called to share the goodness and the gifts we have received.

Our journey with God also has a strong inward direction. God's saving love is directed toward the broken places that are deep inside us. We see this in Jesus' words and actions as he understood and cared for places of fragility and brokenness deep within the people he encountered. We see this in the Psalms, such as Psalm 139: *O Lord, you have searched me and known me...for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

Likewise, today's Gospel reading points toward the inward direction of the spiritual journey. *Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be*

restored?" Salt had many meanings for Jesus' first disciples. Salt was a preservative. Salt was used for purification. Salt was a symbol of covenant and fidelity. Salt was useful and valuable.

Are there any chemists in our congregation? In Jesus' time, there were no chemists in the congregation. People did not understand anything about chemistry, except for one chemical compound: sodium chloride, also known as salt. People understood salt. There were many things that were quite unreliable and ineffective in the ancient world. Salt was effective. Salt was reliable.

You are the salt of the earth. These are verses of self-examination and reflection. The reflection turns on this question: *if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?* There is no easy answer. Let's rephrase the question.

If the church has lost its saltiness, how can its saltiness be restored? What would it look like for the church to lose its saltiness? Imagine a church where people were judging one another harshly. Imagine a church where people were impatient with one another and were saying mean things against one another. Imagine a church where people were seeking to enhance, not God's work and God's power, but their own work and their own power. If the church has lost its saltiness, how can its saltiness be restored?

We can ask the same sorts of reflective questions about ourselves. What would it look like for me to lose my saltiness? What would it look like for me to lose the direction and gifts given to me by God?

This is an important question for us, especially after months of uncertainty and changes created by the pandemic. Many of us have emerged from the pandemic with a feeling of exhaustion or disorientation. For some of us, it's like that critical, effective element in us has gotten shoved to the back of the closet in the disruption and chaos of recent years. For some of us, it's like the salt in us has gotten buried under a pile of extra worries, precautions, and burdens.

And yet Jesus says, *You are the salt of the earth.* So let's recall that salt is something that is uncovered, often deep in the ground. In order to restore our saltiness, you and I might need to do a bit of digging to uncover the salt that is in us. We might need to dig deep. We need to reflect on the love and the gifts that are in the center of our hearts.

Be salt. You have a vocation, a calling from God. You have a vocation to care for God's people or for God's creation in some way. How can you best use the gifts God has given you? How is God calling you to serve God's people? What is God calling you to do in this big, beautiful year of your life?

Be salt. In other words, be yourself. This is not a call to greater self-exertion. This is a call to reflection and to honesty. This is a call to live fully in the reality of being a member of the body of Christ.

Be salt. God is calling you to be yourself in a more full, more effective way. God has given you a great gift. God has given you a gift that is powerful. God calls you to use the gift of your life to bring a little bit more love, a little bit more goodness to the world.