

You are the Salt of the Earth
A Sermon on Matthew 5:13 by the Rev. Philip Major
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This year, in the year we call 'Year A', most of our Gospel readings come from the Gospel of Matthew. More than any of the other Gospels, Matthew's Gospel is like a novel. Matthew tells us the story of Jesus life in a way that is coherent and meaningful.

Near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus delivering three chapters worth of his teachings about what it means to be a disciple to a large crowd of people. We call these chapters "The Sermon on the Mount." Last week we heard the opening portion, known as 'The Beatitudes'. Today we heard the second part of the Sermon. This passage is very powerful; we hardly need to say anything, but just to hear these verses. But let me say a few things about the opening verse.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." In the language of his time, it was unusual to begin a sentence with the word 'you'. So the first word is important. This is an emphatic you. You are the salt of the earth.

Jesus says "You" and Jesus was not speaking to an individual. Jesus wasn't preaching a message of individualism and selfishness. He wasn't speaking only to his closest disciples. Jesus was preaching the sermon on the Mount to a large crowd of people. They were not specially chosen people. They were laborers and fisherman and mothers with their children and old people and poor people.

The large crowd was following Jesus because he was giving them what they really needed. They were seeking after Jesus. He was preaching a message of inclusion and forgiveness. He was healing people who suffered from all sorts of diseases. Jesus was bringing hope to them. So the people who were following him were like all of you. They were people who faced many challenges in life. Some of them were poor. All of them were people who needed words of hope and strength in their lives.

The crowd of people was large, so Jesus climbed up a big hill, to near the top, so the people could hear and see him. And Jesus said to the large crowd of people, "You are the salt of the earth." Let's notice that Jesus does not say, "Be the salt of the earth." Jesus does not say, "You have the opportunity to be the salt of the earth." Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth."

This is not a future possibility. Jesus does not say, "Strive to be the salt of the earth." Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." It is a present reality. The people who are needing to be healed, the people who are following Jesus message of love and inclusion, are the salt of the earth.

Jesus gave this good news to the large crowd of people. Jesus gives this good news to us who following his directions of love and inclusion today. You are the salt of the earth.

What does it mean for us to be salt? What did it mean for the crowd of people two thousand years ago to be salt? Salt contains something that is essential for human beings: sodium. For just a few minutes, set aside everything your doctor has ever told you about going on a low-sodium diet. Today many people have a problem of having too much sodium in the food they eat.

That was not the case for the crowd of people listening to Jesus. Salt was expensive. Salt was precious. Salt was precious because it was difficult to find pure salt. People guarded their supply of salt and protected it by putting it in the best container in the house. Unlike you and me, they needed the salt in their food. They never went to a store to buy large, inexpensive bags of chips and popcorn covered with grains of salt.

They needed salt because salt was expensive. They needed salt because our human bodies have to have sodium for proper functioning of our muscles and nerves, for regulation of our blood pressure, and in order to absorb other nutrients. Salt is essential for human life.

Salt is essential for animals as well. In Africa, people have noticed that animals travel long distances in search of salt for many centuries. In Africa, herds of elephants, rhinos, giraffes, and zebras

who live in regions where there is less naturally occurring salt, migrate long distances each year to find natural salt sources.

Salt is essential. So when Jesus says, "You are the salt" he is saying "You are what is needed." Like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, this would have sounded strange to the crowd of people sitting on the slopes. What could he be trying to say, when he said, "You are the salt?"

There is a large crowd of people, poor people, mothers and fathers with their children, sick people, old people, and laborers. Jesus says to us and to them, "You are the salt." 'You are what is needed'.

You who are following Jesus are bringing something the world needs. What is it? Is it the desire to be more loving? Is it the desire to be welcoming and not exclusive, the way Jesus was welcoming and not exclusive? Those of you who are following Jesus' message of love and inclusion are bringing something the world needs. Is it the willingness to admit that you are broken?

You are the salt. You are bringing something the world needs most right now. Jesus said these words to the thousands of people in his time and place, and Jesus says them to you. You are the salt.

You are the salt of the earth. You are salt for the world. There is something you are bringing, you who are following Jesus around as he is preaching a message of love and inclusion. There is something you are bringing, you who acknowledge your weakness, you who confess your sins. There is something you are bringing, all of you who are striving to follow God's way, you who are striving to return to God.

You are salt for the world. There is something you are bringing, but it's not for you to keep. You are bringing what the world needs most, not to hoard it or protect it behind thick walls, but to share it with the world. You are the salt, not for yourself, but for the world, for the world God created. The world is God's beloved creation, and you are bringing something the world desperately needs.

You are the salt of the earth. In the rest of the verse Jesus cautions us to not lose our saltiness. Don't lose your saltiness, which is your ability to be honest. Don't lose what is most important, which is your ability to tell the truth about your need to return to God. Don't lose your saltiness, which is your ability to admit you have made some mistakes and needing to be healed.

Like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' words might seem strange to you. Like the crowd of people, you might be looking around and saying, "Wait a minute, I thought I was coming here because I am weak, because I am broken?" Jesus says to them, and to us, "That's right, you are weak and you are broken, and many of you are poor, but you are also willing to tell the truth about your weakness. Because of your honesty, you are what the world needs most right now."

You are the salt. Most of the time, people who are bringing gifts of healing and love do not recognize the gift they are bringing to the world, just by being themselves. We have not understood that God doesn't ask us to be perfect. God doesn't ask us to be better than we are. The world doesn't need us to be perfect. The world needs us to be honest, and admit our brokenness, and be willing to ask God to help us. That was the gift of the crowd of thousands of regular, every day working people who were following Jesus around. They were honest. They were willing to admit they weren't perfect.

God doesn't need you to be different. God doesn't need you to be perfect. The world just needs you to be yourself and to be honest. You are the salt of the earth.