

Matthew 5:13-21

I'm no expert in slang, but I will tell you that having a 14-year-old daughter, helps keep in the loop. For instance, these days, if you say someone is being "salty," you mean they're angry, hostile or just really irritated. As in, "Calm down, don't be so salty" or sarcastically, as in "Only my French Fries could use that much salt." But back in Jesus' day, to be salty was a great thing...and Jesus tells us in this passage that we are called to be the salt of the earth. Think about the way that phrase has been used in English today – when we want to describe someone as truly good, with integrity and value as a person we'll say, she or he "is the salt of the earth." It comes right from this Gospel passage. I can't hardly think of a better compliment than to be called "salty" in that sense. But Jesus warns that salt can lose its saltiness- and when it does, it becomes useless, no longer "good for anything." In Jesus' concept then – it's very important to remain salty.

Scholars have debated what Jesus means here – since salt doesn't actually lose its salty flavor over time. He could have been referring to one of 2 things – the first is that the Dead Sea had salt deposits surrounding it and after a heavy rain, the salt would melt away in the water, but a tasteless white residue would remain. Additionally, in ancient times salt was heavily taxed and so over time, people would mix it with a cheap white powder to make it go farther -but doing so would eventually cause it, of course, to lose saltiness.

Salt is a spice and a preservative. Like the other image Jesus uses in our passage today, when he calls us to be the "light" of the world, salt and light can both bring out the best in something...to bring out its true nature - its best flavor or its beauty. Both are revealers. Light reveals visually, salt reveals through taste. Salt and light are like good teachers this way - bringing out the best and revealing the truth.

You and I are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. And when we do this, we are,

with Jesus, fulfilling the law and the prophets. Jesus says: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."* When Jesus speaks about the law and the prophets, he is talking about the Torah- the Scriptures and the commands they contain.

So how do we live out the law of God? How do we live as salt and light in the world?

Our passage from Isaiah describes being light this way:

"If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking
of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness"

Later Isaiah describes God saying: "I have given you as... a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Who do you know that's living in darkness? Who is hungry - literally or figuratively? Who is imprisoned – in body, mind, or spirit? Who is afflicted? Who cannot see what they desperately need to see? To them we can be salt and light. But first we have to notice them... and then we have to have the courage and grace to share the message of God's love and truth through our words and deeds. And notice how important it is to refrain from speaking evil of others in this endeavor - Jesus likens it to breaking the commandment against killing. What we say matters. What we do matters. This then, is obviously a life-long process...and we do it with God's help.

The 12 Steps, the steps used by those in recovery, are deeply inspired. And the 12 Steps remind us that we rely on a Higher Power, on God, to do what we must do. As I pondered the call to be salt and light, I was reminded of Step 12, which seems to echo Jesus' call in this passage. Step 12 reads,

“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” You see, once a practitioner has begun to put the steps into action, they are called to share the message of hope with others.

Jesus is telling us in this passage, that we, having been transformed by God’s grace and seeking to live out the commands of God that will lead to spiritual wholeness, are now called to share that message with others - to be the salt and light of the world. Salt and light do not exist merely for their own benefit. When we live as salt and light, we reveal what we have learned, and we share our gifts with others. In this way, we bring out the goodness inherent in life for those around us and we too are strengthened in our own journeys. If you need motivation, think about when you have been the recipient of God’s grace – when someone has been salt or light for you? I can think of many examples in my own life.

As a little girl I had 2 Sunday School teachers, a husband and wife, who took me under their wings at a time when I needed it, who taught me about God’s love in the Bible, and left me with an abiding memory when I was just 6 years old. Today I can still see their faces looking at me and smiling and saying, “We hope we have a little girl just like you one day.” They showed me, in word and deed, God’s love and acceptance...they were salt and light for me.

As a college student, I was struggling with the path before me as I wondered what to do after graduation - I was feeling lost. But I had a Christian professor tell me I had gifts for ministry, and explained what he saw, and told me I should seriously pray about going into ministry. That professor took the time to notice me, my situation, and my gifts, and helped shed light on my path. At other times people have shared their salt and light with me by simple acts of compassion.... delivering soup when I was sick or helping me with my children as I recovered from surgery. At other times people have been salt or light when they

were able to share with me the hard lessons they have learned about life.

And sometimes being salt and light means sharing or speaking the hard truths. One of my longtime friends was able to challenge me a few years ago when she saw I was living in denial about a hard truth in my life – and she gathered the courage to tell me and helped support me to make a change. The light she shed on my situation was invaluable, even if it was hard to hear at the time.

And so, we strive to resist the temptation to hide our lights under a bushel or dilute our saltiness –by a lack of courage or love.

The good news is we don’t just have to be salt and light – we get to be salt and light – we get the honor and joy of sharing the love and message of God and God’s truth and compassion with others. And we will find that as we do, we too are blessed by it.

So, let your little lights shine.... and be as salty as you can – for the love of God.

Amen.