

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Matthew writes his gospel in a time of theological and social tension. There is conflict between what his audience believes they are called to be and how they are called to live as Jewish people, God's chosen people, and according to God's will and the world they find themselves in, under extreme oppression by the Roman Empire. Their temple is torn down, the divine kingship not yet fulfilled, and they are ruled by the sound of the boots of Roman soldiers marching throughout their land. They feel they are still living in exile even though they have returned from Babylon to their promised land, for where they find themselves feels unrecognizable. They are struggling with how to respond to a world unfamiliar to them, how to be authentic to themselves, faithful to their God, and committed to enacting some change to make the world a better place. They don't even agree on what it means to be Jewish, for some Jews were Jesus-followers, while others were not. Something as essential as the meaning and future of Judaism seemed elusive to them and they were anxious. Many of us can look upon the time Matthew describes as analogous to our current time. We too may be anxious and wondering what it means to be Christian and what the future of Christianity may hold. Daily, we hear extreme voices on what it means to be Christian on both ends of the polarized political system we find ourselves in. This is why we must listen very carefully to Jesus' words in our gospel today, so we may return to the common ground that Christian identity and vocation is all about.

Our gospel text today immediately follows the beatitudes, when Jesus laid out how it is that God's blessedness enters into our world. If we listened closely to the beatitudes last week, we noticed a shift from Jesus addressing the crowd in the third person, "blessed are they" to the second person, "Blessed are you". The shift happens when Jesus says, "Blessed are you when you are reviled and persecuted in my name, for yours will be the kingdom of Heaven." So, Jesus is saying that you who are before me, who are poor in spirit, who mourn the state of the world, who hunger for a world where all are cared for, who many will not understand, who some will hate you for what you believe, you are the salt of the earth and the light to the world. Jesus doesn't say, "at some future point you should or will become the salt of the earth," implying there is something we must do to make that happen, but Jesus says, to each one gathered that morning and to each one gathered here this morning and to actually to those who haven't shown up this morning, "you are now the salt of the earth and the light to the world." Jesus shows us what it looks like to be a Christian and Jesus shows us our vocation, or what we are to do with that core identity as a follower of Jesus.

In common vernacular and taken from the Rolling Stones song, "The Salt of the Earth" we can translate that phrase to mean you are thoroughly decent, you are hard-working, and you are of humble birth. In the context of Jesus, we can imagine this to mean that you live a life worthy of Christ, you show Christ's values to the world, you work hard for the kingdom, and with our new

birth in Christ, live out the humility of Christ as he stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross so that all may come within his saving embrace.

Let's examine why Jesus may have used the salt of the earth as a metaphor for our Christian vocation.

Salt is an essential element, meaning it is one we need, yet it is one we cannot produce ourselves. We need to bring it into our bodies daily for our bodies to be healthy. This means we need to bring the spirit of Christ into our bodies daily for our hearts and souls to be healthy. Just like blessedness, we can neither initiate nor call into being the spirit of Christ within us. Ours is to receive it, daily, and with intention.

Salt stimulates thirst. When we are the salt of the earth for Christ, we stimulate in others around us a thirst for righteousness, a longing for justice for all, a sense of yearning for what is right in the world. Have you ever noticed that, when you have been the salt of the earth, when you've done good for others, when you've fought for the protection of those in need, your heart has grown and so has the heart of others around you? Being the salt of the earth creates a desire in us, and for those who see it in us, for something more.

Salt enhances the flavor of the spices around it. It is true that if you add more pepper to pot of chili, you get more peppery flavor. However, if you add salt to that same pot of chili, it brings out or enhances all the other flavors. Spices such as cumin, cayenne, or chili powder, seem to "pop". And this is where I think we are called to be very mindful. Whatever we adhere or bind our "saltiness" to will be enhanced. If we fall into a pot where what surrounds us is hatred, fear, prejudice, and pervasive negativity, our presence will enhance all of these emotions and behavior. If all we listen to are rants of people putting others down, people yelling and shouting vulgarities at others on both sides of any issue, our presence among them, whether we agree or not with their position, strengthens their cause of division.

Whatever we attach ourselves to, our saltiness will enhance it. So, if we want our voices added to those who speak truth and justice and love for all, then we must attach ourselves there. If we want to be about love, then we must find and adhere to love, so it may be enhanced. If we want our voices to be added to peaceful engagement with others, even those of opposing views, we must find and adhere ourselves to the process of reconciliation, so our voices might be made stronger. If we want to move the world toward reconciliation, we must find and adhere ourselves to the places in the world where this is happening. To do this, to keep our hearts open to and ready to adhere or bind ourselves to the goodness in the world, we must attend to our saltiness through regular prayer, long periods of silence, participation in the sacraments, and deep trust in the hopefulness made real to us through the resurrection of Jesus.

I know I have had to monitor and reduce my time on Facebook this week, for the amount of negativity on both sides of the political spectrum has been oppressively weighing down my heart and soul, taking away my saltiness for hopefulness. I discerned that there was a

difference between being informed about the events of the day and being immersed in them, learning to resist the challenge to buy into and add my voice to the pessimism and hatefulness. I have chosen, rather, to gravitate toward the good, toward the optimism which opens the door to possibility, rather than toward the negativism which slams the door shut.

Because, as Jesus said, salt can lose its saltiness and thus its value. We remain the salt of the earth, but the salt can become distorted and lose its true meaning rooted in Jesus. The salt doesn't go away, but the message of love, humility, peace, and community will be lost if our lives, our voices, our actions, and our interactions with others are not continually turned toward Jesus.

I don't offer this observation and invitation from a self-righteous point of view, assuming I have this all figured out and it's a breeze to me to keep that message of Jesus always in my heart in this troubled and conflicted time. But I know what helps me to stay honest to Christ and that is rigorous self-examination and honest self-evaluation each night. I read through our baptismal vows and I ask myself, when I have done these actions which I vowed to God or when have I missed the mark:

- When have I continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? What have I been reading lately? is it drawing me toward God? What have I been praying about? For all people, for those who agree or disagree with me?
- When have I persevered in resisting evil, or negativity, or prejudice, or closed doors?
- When and how have I proclaimed by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? When have I taken a risk for the Gospel?
- When and how have I sought and served Christ in all persons, loving my neighbors as myself?
- When and how have I strived for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being? How has this shown up in the monetary donations I've made lately or the petitions I've signed?

I ask myself these questions each night and when I find I have missed the mark, when I've bought into the negative climate of our daily existence without seeing or being a glimmer of hope, when I've struggled with processing the hateful remarks posted on Facebook of those whose hands I place the Body of Christ into each week, that's when I invite God into the situation. That's when I ask for God to make some adjustment, move me outside of my box of self-righteousness, for there is one deeper meaning to the metaphor Jesus uses when he tells us we are the salt of the earth.

In the ancient Jewish tradition, salt was a sign of friendship and solidarity. Its property to bind and enhance flavors in a family meal of stew represented a binding of people in a covenant, a deeply committed relationship which involved and reflected the presence of God. Salt was a sign of the covenant, the promise between YHWH and YHWH's people, and was a model for how we should be with each other.

Our Christian identity and vocation as the salt of the earth means that we are to bind to one another, we are to commit to the presence of God among us, and we are to move in solidarity toward the kingdom Jesus speaks of in the beatitudes. We are somehow to bring balance and hope to a world many find as unfamiliar and unrecognizable as the kingdom of heaven.

Partly because this may not have been known at the time, but Jesus' metaphor about our being the salt of the earth breaks down in one place. As we know now, too much salt can be bad for us. It can cause death through high blood pressure, stroke, or heart disease. However, too much of the spirit of Christ within us can never be bad for us. Too much love and blessedness does not cause death, but life. Too much reconciliation and search for common ground does not clog our hearts, but rather opens up the pathways for more possibilities. Too much flavor in our lives does not slow our lives down, but rather enlivens it.

Let us adhere our saltiness to all of that which is of Christ and allow God's blessedness to flow within our world.

Amen.