

**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 5A) – February 9, 2014**  
**Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“You are the salt of the earth”**

In our gospel today, Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; 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.” Using the metaphors of being salt and light—and recognizing that salt’s true savor and light’s illumination, and their other qualities, are discovered only when they are actually used - put into action<sup>i</sup>—Jesus issues his first serious warning to his hearers in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just blessed the poor, the sorrowful, the gentle, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness sake. Now Jesus warns his hearers, and especially their leaders—in the midst of Roman occupation and divisiveness amongst themselves—that being salt or light without action will lead them to destruction. Jesus’ call is a call to *congruence* of being and doing, attitudes and action, words and deeds. Jesus issues this call for congruence between the inner heart and the outward action because thoughts matter, and words matter and tone of voice matters—because we need both right attitude and right action to be complete, to be whole, to be faithful in this difficult world. And by going to the heart of God’s law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, Jesus in fact extends the law rather than abandons it, as he said in the portion we heard today, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matthew. 5:17).<sup>ii</sup>

As I mentioned, we need to note that it was not just on a personal and spiritual level that Jesus addressed his hearers. It was also in the context of their subjugation by the occupying imperial might of Rome. Jesus knew that some of his people responded to being under Roman domination more through accommodation (such as the Herodians and the Sadducees); and some responded from the other end of the spectrum through violent insurrection (such as the Zealots). And then there were those who, although favoring the Zealots, responded more by turning inward and “ghetto-izing”, as it were, from the rest of the unrighteous world (and that included the Essenes and, to an extent, the Pharisees). Jesus is saying to any who would hear to keep your light shining and not to cover it up; and here are some ways you can live faithfully in this world without accommodation or violent insurrection or hiding from the world. Now light is more commonly understood as a metaphor for this kind of living. Therefore, I’ll focus more on some of the meanings of Jesus’ other metaphor of being the salt of the earth.

Salt, as you know, was an essential item in the ancient world and is still so in the modern era. The following are four purposes and meanings assigned to salt through the ages. Salt first of all is a spice—a tasty one. Salt rescues the human palate from blandness by imparting flavor to food. In the ancient world it was also

extremely useful in providing or keeping a flavor in foods that had decayed. It also neutralizes the bitterness found in some foods and restores its sweet flavor (for example, try it in grapefruit juice or in coffee where it can neutralize the acidic and acrid flavor). In fact, true sweetness in food, or in life, is not so much found in the heavy use of sugar; rather it is often found in the salt! The writer Sam Portaro points out that when we are sapped and depleted by hard work or effort, it's not sugar we need, but salt, to replace what we have lost. The body can live without extra sugar, but it cannot survive without salt. Portaro adds that, "The world can often be a bitter place—a place of defeated lives, frustrated goals, people ground to pieces by systems over which they have no control..."<sup>iii</sup> Those pressures often affect our families and our personal lives. If Jesus were looking at this attribute of salt, he was saying metaphorically: you people of God, you children of Abraham are an invaluable part of God's world—you are the spice that is to keep an edge, a liveliness, a freshness in the world, to keep the world from being dull and dreary, or bitter. And you are the spicy edge that reveals God's own presence on earth. And part of keeping an edge is to not settle for the injustices and indecencies that wear our common life down and make it lose all positive flavor. If we do not give the earth a heavenly taste, others will make it a hellish brew. We know this not only on a large scale as we look at events playing out on a global stage; but also, we know it as we ourselves face hostility or coldness, bitterness or injustice in the relationships with those with whom we are in contact sometimes every day.

Secondly, salt is not only tasty, it is also a healing agent—as in healing salts. If seen in this way, Jesus was saying metaphorically: you people of God are a healing balm to the nations. You are the ones to provide a spaciousness of spirit in the midst of mean-spirited religious, social, or political dogmatism. In our divided world and nation, church and denomination, we need more than ever to be this spaciousness of spirit, this healing salt.

Thirdly, besides its tasty and healing attributes, salt, of course, is a preservative. Salt was the most common of all preservatives. Salt delays from decay and cures that which would otherwise rot into uselessness. Also, while pure salt itself doesn't break down and become insipid, salt that was taken from natural deposits, for example, in the Dead Sea, was contaminated with other mineral ingredients which often turned it into tasteless lumps, good for nothing except to prevent slipping in wet weather where it literally was trampled under foot. If seen in this way, Jesus was metaphorically saying: you people of God are the preservers of a great tradition as the children of Abraham—a great and dynamic tradition of a people who are healers, justice seekers and peacemakers. Out of this heritage, we people of God are to be preservers of the goodness, truth, and beauty of humanity and to save the earth from decay, starting by our own example.

Related to this is a fourth attribute of salt which was to make food pure. Salt is the essential ingredient in the kosher food preparation process which extracts

blood from meat, and is an essential element in Jewish dietary law. Seen in this way, Jesus was saying to his hearers: you are a people through whom a purification or cleansing of humanity can begin, beginning with yourselves. (The more you look, the more you see with all this! In fact, there are four other less obvious attributes to salt that Jesus may have also been alluding to, which, for the sake of brevity, I have placed in the footnotes of this homily.<sup>iv</sup>)

Our primary lesson today, then, is that we are the salt of the earth—as spices with an edge, as healing agents, as preservers of dynamic tradition fostering goodness in ourselves and others; and as purifying agents. There is a lot to a dash of salt!<sup>v</sup>

We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus says to us today. We are the seasoning and shine of our world and in that, the spicy and bright revelation of God's presence on earth. As Jesus spoke these words to his people who were under the iron hand of their Roman occupiers, it is vitally important in our day that we do not let anything keep us from being who we are, and act upon that reality no matter what our situation may be. Into this world we are sprinkled. And God uses us as the salt of the earth—sometimes, as through his prophets, “raising the blood pressure of a whole nation,” as Sam Portaro put it, and sometimes in just restoring and sustaining ordinary lives.<sup>vi</sup> God uses you and me as salt to add a little spice to life and to sweeten the bitterness of life—both a high calling and a humble task. The action called for is to live our lives coherently in thought, word and deed in a way that makes people ask questions about us and about their own lives. We are called to exhibit a way of life that makes people scratch their heads and somehow turn to God for the answer. This does not mean doing spectacular deeds. Remember, salt comprises one of the most inconspicuous and ordinary of substances. It is minute and usually mixed with common things. It is down to earth, and hidden most of the time. Yet here, in its unobvious ways, salt achieves its effects. It sharpens or flavors, or heals or preserves or purifies—silently, and subversively. Let us go forth, then, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

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<sup>i</sup> rather than sitting on a shelf until it loses its taste, or being hidden under a bushel basket

<sup>ii</sup> And thus, as we'll see further into the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus connects even the malicious thought with acts of murder, and the salacious thought with acts of adultery.

<sup>iii</sup> Sam Portaro, Brightest and Best (Boston: Cowley, 1998), pp. 201-202.

<sup>iv</sup> First, salt is an essential ingredient of who we are as human creatures. We are constituted fleshy matter made up of water and other compounds, salt being the most prevalent. Metaphorically taken, Jesus is saying you are human, and it is your fundamental humanity that you should show forth; only then does your particularly Jewish, and in our case, Christian, heritage have any meaning.

Another understanding of salt would be Jesus' knowledge of it as a form of currency in ancient society because of its valuable purposes, and because of the belief that salt came from the purest of all things: the sun and the sea. Salt was the most traditional of all the offerings to the gods; and

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some people were actually paid their wages in salt. In fact, Roman soldiers each received a salt ration, or a “salarium,” to purchase salt. “Salarium” is the word from which we derive our English word “salary.” So metaphorically, we are to be the currency of our realm in exchanging our love to others.

And another meaning was that among our ancestors in the faith covenants of friendship were sealed with salt. Metaphorically, then, we must devote ourselves to forgiving and sustaining and supporting strong, holy, and wholesome relationships with God and with others.

However, and finally, salt in large quantities can kill. People, especially my age and older, are warned about the amount of our salt intake, and that’s difficult for people like me who love salt—on popcorn, on eggs, on buttered rice, on just about anything! And besides our bodies, we know that when there is an excess of salt, for example, cast on the ground, nothing will grow there. In fact, Greek and then Roman invaders used salt as a weapon when they salted the fields of their enemies, ensuring that no crops could grow there. So again, metaphorically, the choices we make as salt of the earth, are how to spread ourselves in ways that do not stifle growth in others and in ourselves.

<sup>v</sup> God’s modern disciple Mohandas Gandhi gave a similar emphasis on salt and its savor that is truly discovered through acting in the doing of justice through suffering love. Gandhi identified Britain’s monopoly on salt as a symbolic key to India’s freedom. Every villager needed salt. By marching to the sea and breaking the imperial law by picking up a pinch of salt, Gandhi chose freedom and consequentially persecution and redemptive suffering. His people followed his example. Millions of them made, bought, and sold salt in defiance of British law. Hundreds were beaten as they advanced on Britain’s controlled salt works; tens of thousands including Gandhi were jailed, and Britain’s rule over India was in effect ended—first morally then constitutionally. Gandhi stated on the eve of this great salt march, “Mass civil disobedience [and hence freedom] will not come if those who have been hitherto the loudest in their cry for liberty have no action in them. If the salt loses its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?” Most of us will not necessarily be in the midst of great movements for justice as was Gandhi; however, as I stated earlier, we are all called to be salt in what may prove to be just as hard and result in as much suffering as Gandhi’s campaign for his people’s freedom—but in a far less spectacular way. I’m speaking of the salt’s true savor in action that takes hostility, coldness, or injustice in the relationships with those whom you are in contact each day—whether at work, at church and community, in family life, with your extended - and overextended - families.

<sup>vi</sup> Portaro, *Ibid.*, p. 202.