

5th Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – Matthew 5:13-20
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Being Salt of the Earth Disciples

*“You are the salt of the earth;
but if salt has lost its taste, how can it be restored?”*

Over the past century, America's relationship with salt has fluctuated along with changes in our general wellness and dietary practices. My own family's relationship with salt gradually changed within my parent's lifetimes, primarily because of the advancement of medical knowledge and public health initiatives. My maternal grandfather died of goiter most likely because his diet was deficient in iodine. Iodine deficiency remains a major public health problem in less developed areas of the world. But in the United States, most of us avoid this problem because table salt is usually iodized. As children, my sisters and I could readily identify Morton Salt's Umbrella Girl and the familiar slogan, “When it rains it pours,” because our parents were animate about us knowing the importance of including iodized salt in our diets. But as we got older, health care professionals advised the general public to monitor the level of salt intake in our diets, and our parents became increasingly concerned about maintaining cardiovascular health. Low sodium and sodium-free options have become more prevalent, and commonly appear on restaurant menus, in recipe books, and in grocery items. And now that gourmet sea salts have become popular, we must still remember to include iodized salt in our

diets. I share these “salty” anecdotes not to influence your New Year’s dietary resolutions, but because I want to illustrate how, despite our best intentions, our efforts to do the right thing sometimes results in unintended consequences and sheds new light on the ways in which we view our lives and our relationships with each other and God’s creation.

During Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he reminds listeners of what is important to God - which essentially is our relationship with God and God’s creation. Jesus reflects on his own respect for Jewish law and the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets, and he honors God’s commandments and the intent of temple practices. But Jesus also sheds light on how single-minded interpretations of the law and the prophets, might cause us to miss the mark in living into God’s truth. Jesus tells his followers, “You are the salt of the earth...and you are the light of the world.” Salt and light were precious resources in first century Palestine, and they still are today. Salt is used as a seasoning, a purifier, and a preservative. Light helps things grow, and helps us to see things that we may not have been able to see before. But salt and light do not exist for their own sake. They are interconnected with every other aspect of God’s creation. In referencing these important elements, Jesus evokes our imaginations about how our lives and lifestyles influence the lives of our neighbors - and not just human ones.

When Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth,” he is reminding his followers that they are beloved children of God. He is proclaiming that God’s goodness is already within us and is meant to be shared for the sake of God’s Realm for all. He is empowering each of us and all of us to actively participate in God’s work in the world. While I imagine that Jesus’ teaching was quite inspiring for his new disciples, we all know that on some days it’s easier to be salt and light than on others. And to be frank, the times that we are living in right now are challenging us to reconsider how we are being salt and light in the world. How is our quest for God’s righteousness being hindered by our own self-righteousness? How might our saltiness sting the wounds that shed light on our divisions? How might the ways in which we share our light be hurtful, harmful, and even counterproductive? Our current social and political climate is not unlike the one that Jesus and his followers encountered under the Roman Administration. Yet, Jesus chose to teach kindness, mercy, and compassion most often by embodying his message through respectful and peaceful means.

As followers of Jesus we like to self-identify as “salt of the earth” kind of people; folks who are honest, trustworthy, and dependable. But in this current climate of divisiveness, how might we faithfully live into God’s purpose and our “salt of the earth” identities without alienating the people who God intends for us to love? God invites us to claim our voices and agency in

proclaiming Christ's light in the world. Yet, our ways are not God's ways when our disagreements turn into demonizing; when our actions cultivate dividedness rather than consensus; when it's more important to be right than to be in right relationship with God, our neighbors, and even those whom we consider our enemies. The truth of the matter is that God's truth is beyond anything that we might do on our own, in our own time, and in our own ways. The ways of God in the world exceed those of the well-intentioned scribes and Pharisees among us; and they exceed our wildest imaginations and expectations about what is possible in the most impossible situations. God invites us into the process of bringing healing and wholeness in the world not by commanding and demanding our involvement; but by encouraging our participation, connecting us with each other and inviting us to share from the goodness of our hearts for the benefit of all.

Today's Gospel reading introduces Jesus' reflections on the law of Moses, or the Ten Commandments. Jesus proclaims that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it in surprisingly unexpected ways, but always according to God's merciful goodness. Last week I referred to the *Godly Play* curriculum for children. One of the stories that often resonates with children and adults is called "The Ten Best Ways." The story offers the Ten Commandments in a way that is less judgmental than the one we may have heard as children in church school. The story of The Ten Best Ways

encourages listeners to reflect on how they may follow these ways to live, and to consider the intent of the laws. This is most clearly illustrated when the topic of divorce is presented. We all know that divorce can be a painful and confusing time in a family's life, especially for children. But the authors of the Ten Best Ways offered a way for listeners to live into the spirit of the law, without blaming or shaming, but simply by naming the reality of diverse family models. The authors also remind us that the intent of these best ways to live is always to guide us back into relationship with God and each other. The foundation of all of God's ways is summarized with three wooden pieces that neatly fit into the shape of a heart. The message is to Love God and Love Each Other, and to remember that God Loves You. This is The Way that God intends for us to live into. Sometimes we stray from God's Way, but Jesus is always inviting us to set aside our divisive ways and work to restore our lives, our communities, and our world to right relationship with God and each other.

"You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

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