

A Pinch of Salt & A Flicker of Light

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” Matt. 5:13, 14

Matthew 5:13-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There's an old saying we don't hear quite as often these days. It was once used to describe people who were known to be honest, humble, trustworthy—people of quiet integrity and deep moral character. It was a genuine compliment to say about someone, “*That person is the salt of the earth.*”

When you hear that phrase, I invite you to pause for a moment and let some faces come to mind. Think about the people in your own life—past or present—who fit that description. People who didn't need recognition or praise. People whose presence somehow made things better. People who showed up consistently, who did the right thing when it wasn't convenient, who made room for others to flourish. Often, these “salt of the earth” people don't stand out in flashy ways. They don't dominate conversations or draw attention to themselves. But when they're present, you notice the difference. Something feels steadier. Kinder. More grounded.

That phrase—*salt of the earth*—is older than we might realize. It comes to us straight out of the teachings of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, in that foundational section we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus looks out at a gathered crowd of disciples—ordinary people, working people, people living under Roman occupation, people trying to survive and stay faithful—and he says something remarkable. He doesn't offer instructions first. He doesn't begin with commandments or expectations. He begins with identity. “**You are the salt of the earth.**” And then, just as boldly, “**You are the light of the world.**” (Matthew 5:13–14)

Notice what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say, “*Try harder to become salt.*” He does not say, “*If you follow enough rules, one day you might be light.*” He does not say, “*Here's what you'll be once you've earned it.*” He says, “**You are.**” **Before Jesus talks about what we should do, he names who we already are.** That matters more than we sometimes realize.

A biblical commentary called *SALT* offers a helpful way into these metaphors. It points out, first, that **even in very small quantities, salt and light can make an enormous difference to a much larger whole.** A pinch of salt brings a dish alive. Salt doesn't replace other flavors—it enhances them. It draws out what's already there. And even a small amount of light—a single candle—can change an entire room. It doesn't eliminate darkness all at once, but it disrupts it. It creates orientation. It makes movement possible.

Second, the commentary notes that **both salt and light have simple, elemental purposes.** Salt is salty. If it loses its saltiness, it has no reason to exist. Light is for shining. No one lights a lamp and hides it. In both cases, **identity and purpose are inseparable.** So what is Jesus telling us? Jesus is telling us that **who we are and what we are meant to do cannot be divided.** Our calling does not come later. It is not a reward. It is embedded in who we already are as people shaped by love. Like salt and light, God

has made us—often in ways that feel small or ordinary—to make a difference that is larger than ourselves. God has made us to enhance life, not to overpower it. God has made us to shine—not as blinding spotlights, but as steady, reliable sources of illumination that help others find their way.

Jesus isn't assigning us a new role here. He's naming a truth that already exists. We don't have to work to become salt and light. **We already are salt and light. But—and this matters—we do have to live like it.** We have to claim that identity. We have to embody it. We have to trust that who God made us to be is already enough. In other words, we have to actually be salty. We have to actually be luminous. We have to actually be who we already are.

That's not always easy. Because the world often rewards something else entirely. It rewards loudness over faithfulness. Visibility over integrity. Power over compassion. And it can be tempting—especially for the church—to chase relevance by imitation rather than by authenticity. But salt doesn't become something else to matter. Light doesn't apologize for shining.

Not surprisingly, **College Hill has a reputation for being a fairly “salty” church**—certainly within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. We have a history of asking hard questions. Of engaging difficult issues. Of refusing to separate faith from justice. Of believing that theology belongs not only in creeds, but in public life. And we know that we are *More Light*. That commitment isn't a slogan—it's a theological stance. It's a refusal to hide what God has already given. It's a declaration that inclusion, dignity, and openness are not optional extras, but expressions of the gospel itself.

Still, it's important to say this clearly: none of our good works—none of our justice-seeking, none of our advocacy, none of our welcome—are about earning God's love or proving our worth. **There is nothing we can do to be loved more by God than we already are. That is grace.**

And grace cannot be earned. Our good works are not strategies. They are responses. They are how gratitude takes shape in public. They are how love becomes visible.

Jesus, however, is also honest about the risks. He warns that salt can lose its taste. And when it does, it becomes irrelevant—discarded, trampled underfoot. There is a danger—not just for individuals, but for churches—of losing our distinctiveness. Of becoming so cautious, so comfortable, or so fearful that we stop making any difference at all. Likewise, Jesus says that light is meant to be seen. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. A lamp under a basket is a contradiction. Light that refuses to shine is not humble.

It's ineffective.

We have been given both an identity and a purpose. The call is not to invent them, but to live them out with courage. Or, to put it another way: **we are not being told to become salty—we are being challenged to stay salty.**

There was an ancient Greek ethic that urged people to “Become what you should be.” Jesus offers a different vision: **“Be what you already are.”** In Jesus' teaching, wholeness is not something we achieve at the end of a long spiritual climb. It is God's gift at the very beginning. Steve Garnaas-Holmes captures this truth poetically. He writes:

*You don't aspire to saltiness.
It is who you are.
Your saltiness is your faithfulness
to who God is in you.*

And then, speaking of light, he reminds us:

*You don't need to produce it or generate it.
It's who you are.
When you are truly yourself, it shines.*

That brings us to something crucial we often miss. In the original Greek, the word “you” in both of these statements is **plural**. Jesus is not speaking to isolated individuals. He is speaking to a community. **We are the salt of the earth together. We are the light of the world together.** That means the responsibility doesn't rest on any one of us alone. It means we need one another's gifts. It means some of us bring saltiness, some of us bring steadiness, some of us bring courage, some of us bring care. And together, the world tastes and sees something different.

As we move through the months ahead, and beyond, I invite us—individually and especially as a community of faith—to **recommit ourselves to living our identity out loud**. To reassert our presence not by force or fear, but by faithfulness. And to remember this: light only matters where there is darkness. Which means we must be willing to go there. To engage it. To walk through it. That always involves some risk. Love always does. But it is the risk Jesus took. And it is the risk we are called to take as well.

So let us claim who we already are. We are salt—enhancing life, drawing out goodness, adding flavor where things have grown bland or brittle. We are light—illuminating shadows, making room for hope, refusing to let fear have the final word. Be salty. Be a light

Amen.