

E5A 2023 Matthew 5:13-20 & Isaiah 58:1-12

I like to read before bed, so I have a few books on my nightstand. And because I'm not always in the mood to read the same thing, some of those books are theology and devotionals, some are various types of non-fiction, some are novels. And one, believe it or not, is a cookbook. You might think a cookbook is great reading if you want to fall asleep, but this cookbook, a *New York Times* bestseller entitled *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* is unlike other cookbooks in that it's not just a collection of recipes but more of an explanation of how the building blocks of food behave and interact, how the chemistry of cooking works, and, thankfully, how to rescue cooking projects that have gone amiss. As the name suggests, it includes a whole chapter on salt, and it is from this book that I learned that I've probably been *under*-salting most of what I've been cooking all my life; that humans have evolved to crave salty foods because our bodies won't function properly without salt; that salt doesn't just function to make food taste *salty*, but to balance and enhance all the other flavors in nearly everything we eat; and that salt doesn't just change the boiling point of water, it prevents salt and therefore flavor from cooking out of food. I doubt Jesus spent much time in the kitchen, but whether it was his divine knowledge or just his human experience, he seems to have known how important salt is, and offers both a real compliment and a real challenge when he calls us *the salt of the earth*.

We are right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount: several chapters in Matthew, beginning with the beatitudes, where Jesus outlines his vision of life as the people of God should be living it. Two things that are worth pointing out about the context here: first, when Jesus says “*you* are the salt of the earth” and “*you* are the light of the world” that “*you*” is not directed to an individual but to all of us together: “*y'all* are the salt of the earth” or “*yinze* are the light of the world”. Kingdom living is not primarily about individual piety or private devotion but life in community; we are all in this together. And secondly, when we say all, we mean *all*. Because at the end of this long passage, when Jesus was done saying these things, Matthew tells us that it's not just his 12 disciples but the *crowds* who were astounded at his teaching. Jesus didn't think just a few of us had the capacity, or for that matter, the responsibility, to be salt and light; he extended that challenge to everyone.

Salt and light are perfect metaphors for the life God calls us to lead, because neither of these things exist for themselves. Salt can't taste itself, and it doesn't really have any use all on its own; it becomes valuable when it starts interacting with the environment around it, for the health and enjoyment of whomever is consuming it. Likewise light only really has purpose and meaning in so much as it is perceived by others—helping them see more clearly, driving away

darkness and shadow. As anyone responsible for paying the electric bill will ask: What good is it for every light in the house to be on when you're not in the room to see it?

Although Matthew tells us that this sermon astounded the crowds, Jesus is careful to correct the idea that he is saying anything new: He has not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. When we look back at the prophet Isaiah, we find the Lord calling the people of Israel to that same outward-focused life. The people complained that they fasted and humbled themselves but that God didn't notice. But God answered that they only served their own interests, fasting, yes, yet at the same time oppressing their workers, fighting with and hurting one another. And then the Lord explains what would be the acceptable thing to do: *loosening the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, housing the homeless poor, covering the naked, satisfying the needs of the afflicted.* It's when we do all of these things that the Lord says our light shall rise in the darkness, we'll have guidance and satisfaction, we'll be made strong, and what is ruined among us will be re-built. The Lord had given ancient Israel the law to teach them how to live in ways that were good for their whole community—first, for the benefit of each other, then also to be an example to their neighbors of the abundant goodness of God. But in short order, they turned God's vision of life-giving community into a practice of personal piety that didn't serve any good purpose for their neighbor. And that inward focus that neglected other people was not pleasing to the Lord.

Jesus—fulfiller of the law and the prophets—sets forth the same vision for his followers that Isaiah shared with the Israelites who were starting over after exile: that we live the way God intends for us to live when we act not just in our own best interest but with other people in mind. We are salt, we are light, we are a city on a hill, because we were created to have a purpose beyond ourselves—and again, not just as individuals, but collectively as the church and the whole human family. It's true that we each need salt and we each need light, but so does every other person in the world that we are called to serve. So we repeat Jesus' words to each newly baptized person: *Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* From the very beginning of our discipleship journey, we are reminded that faith is not just between us and God; faith calls us out of ourselves and invites us to live for the good of others.

My cookbook warns us not to skimp on the salt, and Jesus says the same. We are not the salt of ourselves, but the salt of the earth. We are not a light for our own sake, but the light of the world. May we go live more fully into our purpose of making this bland life better, reflecting the light that Christ first shined on us into all the dark places of this world.