



First United Church of Oak Park  
**Briny & Bright, Salt & Light**  
Matthew 5:13-20  
Alicia Reese  
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The Scripture we just read in Matthew began with Verse 13 of Chapter 5, but if, like me, you don't have the Bible memorized, you may not know that this, the fifth chapter of Matthew, begins with the infamous Sermon on the Mount:

*...blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...blessed are the merciful...the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and so on.*

So, our Scripture passage today picks up at the end of the Sermon on the Mount but really should be seen as an extension of Jesus's teaching which can be helpful in orienting us to the whole of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The first part of what we just heard read, Verses 13 through 16, is perhaps just as familiar a passage as the Sermon on the Mount, which says, "you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." Before we dig into this, I first want to address the latter Verses, 17 through 20, where Jesus says:

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill..."*

These last few verses of our lectionary text can feel like an odd shift in Jesus's message or even become a distraction from it, when in actuality these verses are a connective thread, weaving together the past and present, both for Jesus in his time and for us in ours.

Sometimes reading or hearing a different translation side-by-side can be helpful...Listen again, and I invite you to consider what Jesus says in the NRSV translation beside Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel:

- NRSV:** *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;*  
**CPG:** *Don't ever think that I'm trying to destroy the moral and religious principles of our way of life.*
- NRSV:** *I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*  
**CPG:** *My purpose is not to destroy them but to establish them.*
- NRSV:** *For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*

*CPG: I truthfully tell you that as long as heaven and earth remain, not one dotting of an 'I' or crossing of a 'T' will be eliminated from our highest and noblest ideals until every one of them becomes a reality.*

Again, these verses seem like an odd shift in the text, but they tell us, remind us really, that Jesus and his teachings are not meant to minimize or overthrow Mosaic law or Hebrew prophetic word; rather they are the foundation on which Jesus preaches and teaches. The message he brought to those in his Sermon on the Mount, and by extension, the message brought to us by this Word today, is steeped in the moral and religious principles and laws of the Hebrew people.

Now, let's dig into Verses 13 through 16, where Jesus says,

*"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... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house..."*

Personally, I have always loved the language of being the 'salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world.' And, I'd be willing to bet that most people would consider it quite a compliment to be called 'salt of the earth.' And yet, what exactly would that mean to you? What exactly would you be hoping to convey to someone if you paid them this compliment?

As we know, much can get lost when translating into English, which simply lacks the depth of meaning of many other languages. This was affirmed for me again this week after talking to a few people about their understanding, or definition, of what it means to be "salt of the earth." Some of the ways it was described to me was that to be "salt of the earth" means to be a good person, an honest person, a grounded person, a hard-working person, and usually some combination of these things.

Something else that is often lost in translation to English is the ability to differentiate between tenses or singular and plural. There is a very well-known song, based on this Scripture passage, that is a perfect example of this:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

In our passage, we read, "YOU are the salt of the earth... YOU are the light of the world," but remember, these verses are an extension of the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus is sharing his message with a large crowd of people, intending it for all people, communities of people. So, really it should read, 'You ALL are the salt of the earth... You ALL are the light of the world.' Not just YOU, but Y'ALL.

So, the familiar, well-known song, *This Little Light of Mine*, was probably inspired by a translation of this passage with the singular 'you' that places the emphasis on the individual. But I would say that Jesus intended for his words to be heard and understood as the plural 'you,' the collective 'you': y'all.

Because Jesus isn't talking about a single person being salt of the earth or light of the world; rather, Jesus is talking to us, all of us, then, now, and the future collective us. The community, as a whole, is needed to embody salt and light.

Salt of the earth. Light of the world. Jesus does love metaphors, but the choices he makes in his metaphorical teachings are always intentional and meant to be relatable, which these are! Salt and light are things that transcend time, socio-economic class, and cultural context. They are common, everyday elements. And Jesus wants us to be salt of the earth and light of the world in community, in relationship, not alone or in isolation. And this makes perfect sense to me.

Think about it. What good is salt, or light, all by itself? When not in relation to other things?

Salt alone does not taste good, nor is it good for you to consume by itself; it is an additive. When added to a wide variety of foods it enhances their flavor, bringing out the best of it. But salt's only value is in what it can do when combined with other elements. Alone or in excess, salt is no good; additionally, salt that has lost its saltiness is useless, as is salt that sits there never salting anything.

Likewise, light, in the absence of anything else, serves little function. For light to be effective or helpful (or have value) it must have witnesses and it must emerge in an environment that is poorly illuminated, where it then functions to brighten or make visible what is already there. Think about when you turn on a light in your home, you don't do it without a reason; flipping on a light switch serves the purpose of being better able to see your surroundings, enabling you to locate something you are looking for, and to help you to avoid bumping into things.

Another important aspect of Jesus's metaphor is that he uses salt and light as descriptors. He is not telling this community of listeners that they should *become* salt and light, he is telling them these are attributes they already possess...Y'all ARE the salt of the earth...Y'all ARE the light of the world...don't forget to live like it! He's also reminding them, or perhaps assuring them, that they aren't these things in isolation. They, and we, are a community of salt and light, briny and bright.

We each are salt with the ability to enhance flavors, but only when combined with others we are in relationship with, and because of God's relationship with us. We each have light to shine, because of the bright illumination of God's love and grace that are a part of us and that we are tasked with sharing.

Jesus is not telling us that we must become something we are not, or that we should be attempting to attain these new attributes. He is simply bringing our awareness to these incredible God-given gifts we already possess and giving us the key to unlocking them, each other; challenging and encouraging us to share these gifts with others, which we certainly have the ability to do, but also a responsibility to do so. To salt the earth with our brininess, to shine God's light into the world with the divine brightness within each of us.

Clarence Jordan puts it like this...

*You all are the world's light; you are a city on a hill that cannot be hid. Have you ever heard of anybody turning on a light and then covering it up? Don't you fix it so that it will light up the whole room? Well, then, since you are God's light which she has turned on, go ahead and shine so clearly that when your conduct is observed it will plainly be the work of our God.*

Earlier I said that I have always liked the language of being “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” The reason for that is the feeling it evokes for me, one of connectedness. Connected to the earth, as all living beings are, connected to the people of the world, which we often need reminding of, and connected to our creator, who created us from dust of the earth. We are called together to be a community of God's people: briny, flavorful, bright, illuminating for others the love, grace, mercy, and peace of God and God's kin-dom.

I have one last translation to share with you, just a piece of the words we've wrestled with today. This one comes from one of my favorite story Bibles, *Growing in God's Love*...Jesus says,

*“When you are my followers, you make a difference in the world...  
Be like light for the world, uncovered, unhidden...let the light of God's love shine on the people around you...  
Let them see your good actions and praise God in heaven.”*

Indeed, we are salt of the earth and light to the world. Briny and bright. For God made us so.

May our lives, our faith, our actions, our words, be salt to the earth, light to the world, enhancing the flavor of love, and providing illumination where needed.

Take comfort, we already are the salt and light of which Jesus speaks, and we do not walk this journey alone.

Thanks be to God.