

Salty Souls for the Life of the World

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Proper 5, 2026

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Matthew 5:13-20

'You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is good for nothing but to be thrown away and trodden underfoot. 'You are light for all the world. A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under the meal-tub, but on the lampstand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. Like the lamp, you must shed light among your fellows, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your Father in heaven. 'Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete. Truly I tell you: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a dot, will disappear from the law until all that must happen has happened. Anyone therefore who sets aside even the least of the law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who keeps the law, and teaches others to do so, will rank high in the kingdom of Heaven. I tell you, unless you show yourselves far better than the scribes and Pharisees, you can never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

In many parts of Canadian culture today, to be described as salty is not a compliment. It usually means that the salty person is behaving in a fashion both sour and bitter, often over something petty or immaterial. (If this is news, blessed are you who spend little time on social

media, for yours is peace and calm.) In today's passage from Matthew's telling of the Gospel, not only are those listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount told they are salt for the world, but that they are to go to significant lengths to maintain their saltiness. Why does Jesus want his followers to be salty?

Salt is an important substance, true today just as it was 2,000 years ago. It is useful in households as a cleaning agent, a preservative, and flavouring additive. It's an essential component to a healthy human constitution. For Jesus' audience, and perhaps for some of us still, salt has associations with purity and preservation,¹ wisdom,² and peacemaking.³ Salt, in addition to being an important and useful commodity, had important associations with holiness.

Salt's ability to be added to things and absorbed into them seems to have been a key piece of its importance. Salt added to food often seems to disappear, though it can still be tasted and is often an improvement on what was before. Not unlike blessings and gifts from God being added to us and our lives, becoming part of us but still discernible as additions, changing us for the better.

So important was this idea, that salt figured in many of the Church's rituals. Before being used, a prayer of exorcism was said over the salt, reminding all of creation that it is meant to be a source of health and help to humanity, so anything not in aid of those causes had best move on to another home. (Unclean spirits are tricky and can hide in the seemingly most innocent and unlikely of places!)

Once exorcised, salt was commonly used by the Church in a few ways. Salt was—and still

¹Exodus 30:35; 2 Kings 2:19-22

²Colossians 4:5-6

³Matthew 5:1-20; Mark 9:50

is in some places—added when making holy water. This is in imitation of Elisha who purified the water source of the city of Jericho by pouring salt into it and praying over it. The salt and prophet's prayers changed the water from a source of death, sterility, and miscarriage, to a source of life and health.

At baptism, a few grains would be placed under the tongue of the baptizand, along with a prayer that it would be a symbol of holy wisdom and preservation unto eternal life received in baptism. This practice of linking baptism to holy wisdom was so important that several preachers of the Early Church spoke at length about it:

"[St Cyril of Alexandria] calls "salt" the frame of mind that is filled with the apostolic word, which is full of understanding. When it has been sown in our souls, it allows the word of wisdom to dwell in us. It has been compared with salt because of salt's good taste and delightfulness. For without salt neither bread nor fish is edible. So too without the apostles' understanding and instruction, every soul is dull and unwholesome and unpleasant to God."⁴

The Early Church demanded, in an entirely unselfconscious way, that Christian life be experienced with our whole bodies. Baptisms included the sounds of living water, the feel of cold and dampness, the taste of salt, the smell of the chrism, and the sight of the newly-baptized clad in white robes for the first time. Even here, in St Cyril's commentary, he connects our experience of tasty food with God's experience of meeting our souls. As though engaging with us offers God some kind of sensory pleasure or unpleasantness, depending on the seasoning of

the soul. This makes salt a powerful symbol, indeed.

With all of this in mind, it may seem harsh but not surprising when Jesus suggests that salt which has lost its flavour ought to be discarded. Seems like pretty good advice if we're talking about cooking ingredients. It becomes concerning when we recall that just a few words before, Jesus was telling the crowd, and us, that we are salt to the world.

Jesus goes on to tell us that we are also light for the world and that we must not hide ourselves, but be visible. Salt and light are both agents of change, both associated with purity, illumination, and preservation. If we have been made salty and received the light of Christ at our baptisms, then we have been changed. Like salt added to food, that wisdom can be sensed in us. The light we carry with us casts away shadows and reveals hope where it was thought to be lost. We must not hide the way we have been changed, but let it be seen for it is a reflection of God's glory and God's power to create, restore, and change.

Having been made into salt and light for the world, we have the opportunity and power to cooperate with God's work in the world. We have gifts that help us to live out our promises to God. To paraphrase St John Chrysostom, in the same way that salt preserves meat which should long ago have rotted, the disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, can preserve and even help God's work in restoring a fallen world.

God's gifts are always given to us in trust. Our diverse capacities for ministries and our different examples of holy living are truly wonderful to behold. But they are not ours, not something we created for ourselves. Like the salt and light at baptism, they are given to us, not so that we

⁴Simonetti, Manlio, ed. *Matthew 1-13*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, edited by Thomas C Oden, NT 1a. IVP Academic, 2001, 92.

might glorify ourselves with them, but so that we might use them for the good of our neighbour and, in so doing, glorify God who gave them to us at the first.

May we have the courage and wisdom to be salt and light for the life of the world.