

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
 Year A, RCL
 February 9, 2020
 North Fork Ministries
 Gospel:
Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, "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, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

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From his pulpit on the mountain side, Jesus tells his listeners that they are the salt of the earth. Barely pausing to take a breath, he then tells them that they are the light of the world. And then, after hopelessly mixing his metaphors, he sets a standard for entering the kingdom of heaven that is beyond the reach of even the most faithful followers of the law, thus ending his sermon on a real downbeat. Clearly Jesus had never enrolled in a homiletics course at the seminary in Jerusalem.

Even so, the Sermon on the Mount has endured, because it spoke to the people who first heard it,

and it continues to speak to us today. Salt, however, was viewed rather differently in first century Palestine. We haven't had a lot of cold, icy weather this year, but when we do, we see a lot of salt, spilling from the rear of snow plows and trucks, onto the icy roads of the North Fork. Although the price of salt has risen over the years, salt is still cheap enough to scatter on streets and sidewalks and be trampled under foot.

It was not so for Jesus' listeners. Salt was precious. Used as a spice and a preservative, it was a very valuable commodity. So if Jesus tells people that they are salt, then what they hear is that they have value - that they are worth something. These were words to be taken to heart by Jesus' listeners, a downtrodden people, living, as they did, under the harsh rule of Roman occupiers. If you were "worth your salt", you were more than a penniless peasant.

So in an age in which salt is abundant enough to scatter like dirt, how can the metaphor still speak to us? If you are any kind of a foody you've probably come across the wide varieties of salt available for sale at specialty stores and on Amazon – French Grey Sea Salt, salt dried in lava beds, salt mined in the foothills of the Himalayas, salt with a sulfur content high enough to smell like boiled eggs. Not

just ordinary sodium chloride, not just the white stuff from the Morton saltbox, but salts as varied and interesting as the places from which they were hand gathered.

So it is that Jesus can call us the salt of the earth and we can come to an understanding that we don't all have to be the same. Our saltiness can be expressed in all manner of ways. But I think the sense of our saltiness goes deeper than that. A little salt brings out the flavor in a fine dish. Without salt, sauces are bland. Soups taste flat. The natural flavors of all kinds of food are enhanced by the addition of a little salt.

Looking around the congregation today (especially at the Scouts that have joined us), I'd say we already contain the varied and interesting ingredients that have enabled us to put together a pretty tasty stew. But we are still cooking. The chief cook, the master chef, may need us to stew for a while longer.

You may have read how the Sufi poet Rumi, talks about boiling a pot of talking chickpeas until they are fully cooked:

A chickpea leaps almost over the rim of the pot where it's being boiled.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

The cook knocks him down with the ladle.

"Don't you try to jump out. □ You think I'm torturing you. □ I'm giving you flavor, □ so you can mix with spices and rice □ and be the lovely vitality of a human being.

Remember when you drank rain in the garden. □ That was for this."

Grace first. Sexual pleasure, □ then a boiling new life begins, □ and the Friend has something good to eat.

Eventually the chickpea □ will say to the cook, □ "Boil me some more. □ Hit me with the skimming spoon. □ I can't do this by myself.

We're still cooking. The salty-savoriness that happens when just the right ingredients are combined to make a delicious stew is still in the making for this little collection of chickpeas we call church. (or this little collection of chickpeas we call a Scout Troop).

So what does it mean to grow tasty or to have our saltiness restored as we cook in God's spiritual broth? The chickpea doesn't have to enroll herself in culinary school, although learning new ways to pray if the old ones have grown stale, might not be a bad idea. All that is really required to be nicely cooked is spending some time stewing in God's

grace.

Jesus spent most of the rest of his sermon on the mount telling his listeners, in some detail, what it might look like to be blessed by saltiness. Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, for they will see God. Turn the other cheek, walk the second mile, love your enemies, forgive others their trespasses, don't store up treasures on earth, consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they reap. What a sermon that was! And it was all told in the context of an exhortation by Jesus to his listeners to be good Jews, to practice their faith, not with superficiality, but with all their hearts, with all their being. The sermon on the mount wasn't a lot different than the the scout oath – a promise to help other people at all times; to keep yourself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

It's how we get salty. We pray the prayers that Jesus taught us. We observe the sacraments as they have been observed by generations before us. We read scripture and seek a deeper understanding of the tradition. We turn toward the God that resides within each of us, and explore the depths of our faith. We practice the presence of God.

(It's how we get salty – by living into the promise to

be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind, brave, reverent and all the rest of the scout law.)

And then Jesus came down from the mountains to show his listeners what it meant to be the light of the world. His first act was to cleanse a leper who asked to be made clean. Then he healed the Centurion's servant, and a paralytic. He cast out demons and made friends with tax collectors and sinners. He restored others to life. He made the blind to see and the mute to speak, always showing immeasurable compassion for those shunned by others. He allowed his light to shine, through the good works he was empowered to accomplish. And he urged his followers to do the same.

We are called to be both salt and light. Salt and light represent the spiritual dichotomy of contemplation and action. Our saltiness is enhanced by turning inward, practicing the spiritual disciplines that make us truly tasty, desirable, both to God and to those we encounter. That is the place where we learn to love ourselves, so that we can then love others, and then allow our light to shine upon them by working for justice, showing compassion, and putting our love into action.

"Then," as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "your

light shall break forth like the dawn.”