

February 5, 2023  
Matthew 5:13-20

Epiphany 5  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Condiments of Grace”**

“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.”

One of my regular errands on my day off is grocery shopping. While I am practically clueless in the kitchen (I’ve often said that the best thing I make for dinner are reservations) I am good at shopping for the food we eat. I’ve become very familiar with my favourite supermarkets, and approach my shopping trips like a military campaign, mapping out where the items on my list are located and going through the store as quickly and efficiently as possible. On one of my recent Monday shopping trips, I had a few items on my list that were located in the condiment aisle. While I have been down this aisle numerous times, on this day I looked with wonder at all of the items available to shoppers. There were a variety of ketchups, including some that are lower in sodium; numerous mustards, from yellow to brown to Dijon; many brands of steak sauce, Worcestershire sauce, and teriyaki sauce; and a lot of varieties of hot sauce for the more adventurous eaters. Near the condiment aisle was a row of spices, salt and pepper, and other flavourings that can enhance a meal. While all of these condiments and spices have a wide variety of uses, one thing they share in common is that none of them are meant to be at the centre of a meal; no one sits down to a dinner of ketchup and mustard, and diving into a bowl of salt is not a pleasant thought. Condiments and spices do not exist for their own sake; their purpose is to add flavour to a meal and enhance a diner’s enjoyment of their dinner.

While many people have to be careful with their salt intake for health reasons, salt has played a major role in societies for centuries. Before refrigeration became common, salt was used as a preservative; its common use as a seasoning is mentioned in both Testaments of the Bible:

- “Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt, or is there any flavour in the juice of mallows?” – Job 6:6.
- “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” – Colossians 4:6.

Salt has many connotations in Biblical tradition, being used in reference to sacrifice, covenant fidelity, purification:

- “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.” – Leviticus 2:13.
- “All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the LORD I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and your descendants as well.” – Numbers 18:19.
- “Now the people of the city said to Elisha, ‘The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.’ He said, ‘Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.’ So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt into it, and said, ‘Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.’” – 2 Kings 2:19-21.

It is not surprising that Jesus makes use of this Biblical tradition regarding salt when he teaches his followers that *“you are the salt of the earth.”* (Matthew 5:13). Following his Beatitudes which define what it means to be truly blessed as a child of God who has been reborn through God’s gracious love in Jesus Christ, Jesus turns to teaching these followers that the life of discipleship is lived within the community of faith, a community charged with a mission to the world, a world where Jesus’ blessed community will find that *“people [will] revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”* (5:11). As the “salt of the earth,” they are called to serve the world that is the creation of God (*“I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”* – 13:35, 2 Chronicles 29:30) and will be the scene of the disciples’ mission (*“the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom”* – 13:38), where God’s will shall finally be accomplished. As salt does not exist for its own sake but is in the service of enhancing and preserving the food to which it is applied, the disciples’ mission and purpose is not for their own sake but is for the sake of the world and Christ’s mission to *“make disciples of all nations.”* (28:19).

As important as salt can be in many situations, it is useless if it has lost its taste or become impure: *“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”* Salt loses its “saltiness” by becoming so impure, so mixed with other elements that it loses its function. As salt and other condiments exist for the sake of other food, the disciple community may be seen as people who are called to be “condiments of grace,”

serving for the sake of the mission of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world; the church's mission is never for its own sake, but for the sake of others.

- “My favourite definition of the church comes from Karl Barth, who said, ‘[The Church] exists ... to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world's own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise’ ... Having experienced the grace of God for ourselves, we wanted to dispense it to others, free of charge, no strings attached, as grace always comes. The church, I have learned, can indeed be a new sign radically dissimilar to the world's own manner, and contradict it in a way which is full of promise. For this reason, church is worth the bother.” – Philip Yancey.

As salt does not exist for its own sake but is always used in the service of something else, so also does light exist to illuminate that which is outside of itself. Jesus next uses the light metaphor to present the disciples as illumination for the world: “*You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (5:14-16). The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are.

- “As a metaphor, light also functions somewhat communally. That is, in the absence of anything else, light serves little function. Rather, for light to be most effective, it must emerge within a poorly illuminated environment to brighten that which already exists so that it may be perceived by others in the space.” – Melanie A. Howard.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the city on a hill in order to present the disciple community as inevitably and unavoidably being seen: “*A city built on a hill cannot be hid.*” The light and salt sayings picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is to light. With the three metaphors of salt, light, and city, Jesus in Matthew's Gospel strikes a death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private. The community of faith is a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed. The community of Jesus' disciples is created to be light for the dark world, as Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: “*the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.*” (4:16, Isaiah 9:2). As Jesus' deeds point not to his own glory but to the glory of God (“*When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings*” – 9:8), so the purpose of the disciples' engaging in their acts of righteousness and justice before the world is not for their own sake but to glorify God: “*The*

*disciples' mission is authorized and presupposed by Jesus' own mission and is the continuation of it.*" (M. Eugene Boring).

As Jesus encourages his audience to let their good works be seen by others so that they may *"see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,"* he goes on to teach that their righteousness as the community of his disciples must be of the highest level. He cautions those who might misunderstand his teachings on grace as a rejection of the teachings of the Torah by telling his audience *"do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."* (5:17). "Law" refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible; "prophets" comprise both the "Former Prophets" (Joshua – Kings) and the "Latter Prophets" (Isaiah – Malachi). Jesus does not abolish the Law, but neither does he merely affirm the status quo. Jesus accomplishes an ultimately positive action with regard to the Law: he "fulfills" it. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus returns to Nazareth and enters the synagogue on the Sabbath, where he was invited to read from the prophet Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* (Luke 4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2). When Jesus complete the reading, he announces to his hometown congregation that *"today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"* (4:21). The advent of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaims is the fulfillment of scripture. This messianic fulfillment does not nullify or make obsolete the Law and the Prophets, but confirms them. The continuing authority of Scripture in its totality is the revelation of God's Will, which Jesus affirms by stating that *"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"* (5:18). The phrase "truly I tell you" ("Amen, I say to you") is Jesus' way of solemnly introducing an authoritative statement; the phrase occurs thirty-one times in Matthew. Here, it introduces Jesus' teaching about the Law's enduring validity:

- "Jesus sees himself and his teaching as being in continuity with Israel's religious heritage. The Law itself is not abolished, but its role changes as Christ brings forth its deeper meaning. The Law retains its status as God's revealed word, and one must continue to teach and obey these commandments." – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

While the Law has continuing validity for Jesus' followers, it is not ultimate, in contrast to the word of Jesus, which is normative and will never pass away: *"The Law is affirmed, but relativized."* (Boring).

Jesus insists that even the “small” commandments are important, and that *“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.”* (5:19). Jesus’ teaching calls for *“a radical internalization, a total obedience to God, a complete self-giving to neighbour, that carries the ethical thrust of the law to its God-willed conclusion.”* (John P. Meier). Jesus calls his followers to wholehearted trust and obedience toward God that radiates God’s love for the world.

- “Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus! Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as Thou shinest, so to shine as to be a light to others; the light, O Jesus, will be all from thee; none of it will be mine; it will be Thou shining on others through me.” – John Henry Newman.

Jesus’ teachings in 5:17-20 may be understood as the foundation upon which all his subsequent instruction in the Sermon on the Mount is based. Jesus’ teaching is steeped within Jewish tradition and Jewish faith, and it should not be understood as offering something that supersedes the Law but as that of one who holds the Law in greatest respect. *“Jesus’ teachings, then, are best understood as those of a Jewish reformer, not as those of one who is attempting to denigrate and replace an ‘outdated’ religious system.”* (Howard). Jesus goes so far as to cite the scribes and Pharisees, who in Jesus’ day were the paradigms of faithful observance of the Torah, as those by which his followers should measure their faithfulness to the teachings of the Lord: *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (5:20). One who is to be faithful to their call to be salt and light needs to take the teachings of God’s Word seriously and to model their lives after those who have exemplified true discipleship: hearing God’s Word and living in obedience to God’s Teachings.

Jesus’ holding up the Pharisees as examples of the righteousness that his disciples must emulate may be confusing given the negative way in which Pharisees are often portrayed in the gospels. The word “Pharisee” often brings to mind a “hypocrite” or a “self-righteous/sanctimonious person” (Webster’s Online Dictionary), one who is often opposed to Jesus’ teachings and the actions of the disciples:

- “Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do

your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.’” – Matthew 15:1-2.

But despite this negative reputation, the Pharisees shared many basic beliefs with Jesus, including the belief that the Law should be applied to all areas of life. Both believed in the general resurrection, future rewards and punishments, and the activity of angels and demons in the world. According to Josephus, a first-century historian and Pharisee himself, the Pharisees “*cultivate harmonious relations with the community ... and receive respect from the community because of their virtuous lives.*” Jesus’ followers must be more committed to God’s justice in the world than even these prominent leaders. They are to listen to his words as disciples of “*the Matthean Jesus, speaking more confidently than any First Century rabbi, implies that he is more authoritative than Moses, and seems to legislate with all the assurance of the God of Sinai.*” (Raymond Brown).

It is important to note that Jesus is not teaching his followers that they will become salt and light or that they should strive toward this identity; he is stating that they *are* salt and light for the world. Those who answer Jesus’ call to discipleship are called to “*believe Jesus’ word and to accept and live out the new reality it has already created in the call to discipleship.*” (Boring). While salt and light do not exist for their own sake, they are essential for the health and vitality of the world, blessing that the faith community are called to share in the name of Jesus Christ.

- “The disciples are told that they can possess the ‘extraordinary’ only so long as they are reflective: they must beware how they use it, and never fulfill it simply for its own sake, or for the sake of ostentation. The better righteousness of the disciples must have a motive that lies beyond itself ... We have to take heed that we do not take heed of our own righteousness. Otherwise the ‘extraordinary’ which we achieve will not be that which comes from following Christ, but that which springs from our own will and desire.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

One of Jesus’ most significant teachings in the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord’s Prayer, the model prayer that we share in all worship services as well as a teaching as to how disciples of Christ are to pray. When we pray “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*” we are asking God to use us as instruments of God’s Will, as earthen vessels that will convey the extraordinary gift of God’s gracious love to others. As condiments do not exist for themselves but to enhance the food we share, followers of Jesus are called to be the “condiments of grace” that will

enhance the lives of the world that God so loved that he gave his only Son for its sake. The Church exists not for itself but for the sake of the mission into which our Lord has called us and for the sake of sharing the Gospel with others; the Church is the community that is inspired by the Holy Spirit so that “*we believe God’s holy word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.*” (*Small Catechism*). May we be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, living as God’s holy people for the sake of God’s mission to all people so that they may see our good works and know that God’s love is for them, and that they may along with all who walk as children of the light glorify our Father in heaven.

Amen.