

Called to Salt
Matthew 5.13-20
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Epiphany 5A
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To get to the metaphor, we have to understand the faith story into which Jesus was speaking. They'd set it up as a structure to protect what was right and good and true. They knew it would take professionals to cross the "T"s and dot the "I"s because there were so many details, and the details mattered because they were the portals to holiness. But as it tends to happen with human people and their institutions, and it surely happens with us today, the details took priority. And the professionals became the practitioners of holiness. And the sacred became far too separate from the ordinary. And before too long, the details and the structure were more important than the essence they'd worked so hard to protect. *How* you make the sacrifice was more important than showing up. *Who* could make the sacrifice was more important than opening the doors to all. The intention behind the structure was initially to protect the goodness of God, but Jesus began to disentangle their concept of God's goodness from their relationship to the structure.

God's goodness was everywhere and in everything. Holy didn't live in the temple. Sacred wasn't guarded inside a locked up building to be visited from time to time. Jesus didn't work to either ditch holiness or make light of the structures. He spent considerable time preaching and teaching in the temple. His family honored the traditions of dedicating and raising him in the faith. He observed and celebrated the high holy days with friends. But he expanded the imagination of who was included at the table for those celebrations. And when he preached and taught, he challenged the widely accepted teachings of protecting and guarding and getting everything just so. To paraphrase Nadia Bolz Weber, he was innovating with integrity from his rooted center in his religious tradition.¹

One of the first and biggest changes was the way he gathered disciples from unexpected walks of life and not from the best-of-the-best who were studying to be rabbis. He started dismantling the system of professionals who protected the structures because he knew they were becoming obstacles to holiness and not portals. He looked for the ordinary for men and women who were open-hearted, and he called them to follow. He called them from their regular lives not to become something that they

¹ Nadia Bolz Weber, "You must be rooted in tradition to innovate with integrity."

weren't but to become more fully themselves than they'd ever imagined they could be. Not everyone followed. Some heard what he was asking and couldn't give up the structures of life and faith as they knew it, and those folks went away sad. But it didn't stop Jesus from expanding, dreaming, and creating a movement.

His sermon on the mount, those central teachings of his Way we now have cobbled together in our sacred text, lays out just how deeply he believed that each and every one of us could take on this work. Not just "maybe, if we try really hard, and if we learn how to cross the "T"s and dot the "I"s just as good as the professionals always have. He talked about blessedness and comfort. He called them to empathize and grieve with the world. He described a gentleness of being and a heart for mercy. He challenged them to stop being peacekeepers and start being peacemakers because making peace is the work of God's children. And knowing full well that the professionals may feel threatened and the comfortable may feel discomforted, he promised them that God's blessing will rest on them when the way he invites them to follow begins to feel more narrow than they first expected. The way would not be easy, and many will walk away sad rather than joining you in the work of seeking God's kingdom. He promised the Way he showed them would always be one of unfolding invitation.

And then he spoke right to the heart of their self-doubt and fear. If you think you aren't cut out for this kind of life, know that you are. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. There is no striving toward a goal. No trying to be. This invitation does not require working on becoming more of x and less of y. This call to follow is a call to fully inhabit your best and truest self for the sake of the world and the expansion of God's kingdom. This is doing what you love, that thing come alive, that makes you lose track of time, and doing it in a way that makes the world more loving and more fully itself. You *are* this. You were *made* for this. To abandon these ways is to abandon who you were created to be. To abandon these ways is to deny who you are. To abandon these ways is to abandon the divine truth that God is with you, moving, radiating, compelling, guiding.

And he knew it wouldn't take long before folks were accusing him of trying to kill his tradition and making a movement instead of supporting the structures. We've never done it this way before, Jesus. That's not how we do things here, Jesus. The last guy before you tried to do this, too, and he didn't last long. You'd best be careful, Jesus. He assured them all he hadn't come to abolish anything but had instead come to call them all to righteousness. But all of the structure and the rules and the tradition for its

own sake, this form of this institution was not its best face; it was not its deepest wisdom, as Alexander Shaia puts it.²

This open-hearted, empathetic, meek, pure, peace making work would draw them closer toward God's breath and not farther away. But first, they must all be salt and light. Fully, truly give themselves to the ways he laid out before them. Alexander Shaia says that the language of light can be complicated because sometimes "light" is too much of a product; a stasis. Jesus surely wasn't talking about *doing* one more thing to check a box or cross a mandatory task off of a list. In calling people to salt and light, he was naming a state of being. To get at the idea of divine light, Shaia instead talks about "the gift of radiance that comes out of the dark." Instead of imagining light as a fixed thing..on or off, there or not there, he speaks of radiance because "radiance moves, and there is a place in the deepest dark where the new radiance bursts forth afresh." You are called to flavor the world. You are called to radiance. You are called to move and shine in such a way that holiness is new and sacred is new and God's presence is once again discovered in all things and in all places.

Amy Lindeman Allen writes, "Indeed, it is to this level of commitment for righteousness—right living—for all in God's creation that the rest of Jesus' words points. Light is not meant to be stored up and enshrined, but rather, to be shared with all who need its guidance and warmth."³

We want to enshrine. We want to store up. We want to protect ourselves against enemies we cannot name and cannot control. As Karoline Lewis writes, "our default setting...leans toward comfort, conformity, and complacency when what Jesus really needs from us is to be the salt and the light—the salt that just might sting and the light that just might expose what we do not want to see."⁴ This is what Jesus calls out in us; "not just a certain way of being in the world, but an ultimate way of being in the world...The sooner we realize this, the better." When you are doing the work that serves the world, when you are giving yourself to the thing that makes you come alive, you live into the words we read from Isaiah. When you are loosing the bonds of injustice, sharing your bread with the hungry, satisfying the needs of the afflicted, then your light will rise like the dawn out of darkness, and the Lord will be your guide. You'll

² Alexander Shaia on his devastating experience in seminary in the 1970s, "I had this unshakeable sense of my goodness. Even to the point where my tradition was saying something different, I had the gift to know that this form of the institution was not its best face. It was not its deepest wisdom."

³ <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-saltiness-matthew-513-20-amy-allen/>

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3156

be like a well-watered garden, like a spring that never runs dry. And remember, there is not striving toward this way of being. You are salt. You are light. You have been called by name already, and the world needs your calling to become realized.

As you prepare to come to the table today,
take a while to think of salt and light people.

Salt and light moments.

Salt and light that draws you into God's presence, inspires hope in you.

your life wouldn't be the same without...

this church wouldn't be the same without...

the city wouldn't be the same without...

Before we come to the table, we will name the salt and life we witness...