

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Year A

You are the Salt of the Earth

[RCL] Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12]; Psalm 112:1-9, (10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]; Matthew 5:13-20

Youth ministers are a vicious lot. They are also wonderful human being, but they are vicious.

Youth ministers are wonderful because they work with a population that many people are either afraid to work with or simply don't know how to work with. They have a life-long, enduring impact on the youth they serve; but youth ministers are vicious because they have come up with the following activities:

- 1.) Take an onion. Put a stick in it at cover it with caramel. Have the youth bit into it.
- 2.) Take some Oreo cookies. Remove the cream filling and replace with tooth paste. Have the youth eat the cookies.
- 3.) Take a Twinkie. Remove the cream filling and replace with mayonnaise.

I told you they were vicious. I'm not relating all this to raise your ire about youth ministers or make your stomach turn. All these gross-out object lessons are meant to teach young people about how appearances can be deceiving and the importance of gaining a deep understanding of situations so that we don't just jump into moral and mortal danger.

We all want authenticity, don't we? We all want the inside to match the outside. When promised a caramel apple, who wants to bite into an onion? Nobody delights in a toothpaste Oreo to say nothing of a mayo-Twinkie. The inside should match the outside. Sugar and salt look identical to the eye but they operate differently on the tongue. Which one is which? Only a full tasting will be able to finally decide.

Today Jesus has a lot to say about salt and the importance of salt being salt and not something else, "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 underfoot." Well, what does that mean?

First, it's important to remember that Jesus is talking to his disciples: it's these folks that he is describing as the salt of the earth. That is good and bad news for them, and therefore us.

We see that Jesus has a vision in mind, a standard by which we disciples should be in the world. We are meant to be the salt of the earth, a sort of leaven or spice for the world. It's interesting that Jesus uses this metaphor of salt.

Salt, in a dish, is not just salty, but since it is such a fundamental flavor it highlights all the others. In a word, we followers of Jesus are meant to enchant the world, to draw out the flavors of all the world, existence, everything!

For too long Christians have been the people who want to quit the earth, to escape into an abstract spiritual existence. But here we see that Jesus would have his followers deeply engage with the world, indeed to act as a spice that enlivens all the rest. With this spice, the world feels things more deeply, the highs are higher, the lows are lower. With this spice of Jesus' disciples the world feels, thinks, and acts more profoundly.

Now, before all this, Jesus says that we *are* the salt. The key word here is *are*. He doesn't say, "You will someday be the salt of the earth," or "Continue to work at becoming the salt of the earth," no, "You *are*, the salt of the earth." For Jesus, we disciples are indeed already the salt of the earth, this is a spiritual reality, we are already the salt of the earth, it is a state of being that is already in place. This calls to mind the great saint Evelyn Underhill who said that spirituality is more about reminding and remembering than learning something new. We are this salt of the earth, if you don't believe me, ask Jesus.

So with this reminder that Jesus has a clear idea of what we are to be in the world, this enlivening spice, and that we are indeed that spice, we come face-to-face with the prospect of how we are doing in the light of Jesus' statement. In other words: how are we doing in living with the standard that Jesus has laid out? Are you living as the salt of the earth? Are you enchanting and enlivening the flavors of life, are you feeling, thinking, and living deeply in the pain and joy of the world or are you living in another way that Jesus doesn't describe? He is pretty harsh too when considering the prospect of salt without saltiness: "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 underfoot."

It seems to me that a life of saltiness that Jesus is getting at here is one that, without fear, moves into the world in love and affection. We salty ones don't allow ourselves to be bowled-over by the tragedies and disappointments of the world, but we also don't allow ourselves to fall into quiet resignation over injustices. We followers of Jesus, we salty ones, walk a brave line of love into the deepest experiences of life, neither being swept away nor disengaged. This brave walk of course happens only because we are empowered by the Holy Spirit which, in my experience, is more about granting patience and tenacity more than anything.

So what does this salty life look like anyway? To me it seems that a salty life of following Jesus is one where, first and foremost, the disciple has begun to make peace with themselves. Where in your life have you shied away from the cold facts of life? Which relationships have you let grow cold because the truth is just too awkward? Which aspect of your personality and habits are hindering a zest of life, what needs the salt of Jesus?

Next, I suppose, is that the salty ones begin to move beyond themselves and gently offer themselves to others; hopefully simply as presence, ally-ship, and friendship and not as an overpowering fixer. We are salt, not cayenne. Salt allows the flavors of others to shine. Cayenne insists on being forward and in your face. Being salt means that we listen, we notice, and we don't have to have our way.

Being salt for the earth means to remind the world of what God created it to be: a loving commonwealth that is created for the flourishing of all and that anything other than that is not living in accordance with how God desired things to be. You are the salt of the earth, called so by Jesus himself, no go, be salt and nothing else, not sugar, or an onion, or a toothpaste Oreo.

Walk bravely into the world and know that we go together empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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