



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 5, 2023
ISAIAH 58:1-9a; PSALM 112:1-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-12; MATTHEW 5:13-20

YOU ARE WORTHY



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.”]

A cylindrical box of Morton salt costs about \$1.30 in the store today. Salt traded on the market bears a price of about eight cents a

pound, about 12 cents for the quantity in the trademarked familiar blue box, so the rest of the cost for the store-bought salt factors in

iodinizing it for our thyroid glands, packaging, shipping and grocery store operational cost. But it is still relatively inexpensive, ubiquitous and necessary to flavoring.

It is interesting to consider how the role of salt has found its way into our idioms of language. Surely we've all heard comments like:

She is "salt of the earth," which is to say she is a good person, solid, trustworthy, reliable.

To say, "He is worth his salt" stems from the practice in ancient times of being paid your wages in a measure of salt. That is to say, he is good at his work, dependable, trustworthy.

Even our word "salary" comes from the Latin root "sal" for salt because a Roman soldier received a monthly wage in salt.

Jesus would have had these idioms in his quiver of metaphors as well, and the folks to whom he was speaking would have understood salt's important role in their lives.

Without refrigeration, salt served as an important food preservative, especially for fish and meats, to be dried and not spoil. It was also an anti-septic long before antibiotics arrived on the scene. The notion of pouring salt in a wound conveys the double pain of the injury itself and then the application of

salt into the wound to sterilize it in hopes of preventing infection. It burned but served as an astringent that gave the possibility of healing a chance. For the record, I don't recommend pouring salt in the wound anymore, literally or otherwise.

Jesus shares this early on in his ministry, speaking to people in small villages around the Sea of Galilee. Common folk in the region—eking out an existence close to the land, using their hands to make agrarian ends meet, trying to navigate the hardships of imperial oppression and harsh taxation—these were the people who were drawn to Jesus' words of hope and healing and his vision for God's realm of peace and fullness of life.

These words of encouragement are part of a larger discourse in which Jesus offered radically new ways of seeing the world, and challenging ways to conduct ourselves in that world, while also critiquing some of the institutionalized ways of understanding what it meant to be righteous. "Righteous" was then, and still is, a loaded word, often misunderstood or misapplied, but I think what Jesus meant by it was simply about being in right relationship with God and neighbor. Conduct that nourishes those relationships is righteous; conduct that stifles them is not.

This brief passage is something of a hinge point in the entire discourse that spans three chapters of Matthew's gospel. He is speaking to people who have largely been told their entire lives that they are not worthy—they were told that by religious leaders and imperial leaders alike, and along comes Jesus who says:

You are the salt of the earth! Notice it does not say, if you do such and such, then you will at some point in the future hope to become salt of the earth. He says, you ARE salt of the earth. Present tense. Present attribute. He was saying to them in what must have been a tender, encouraging moment: I know you! You are good, trustworthy, reliable. You are worthy—worthy of this movement, worthy in God's eyes, you are worthy.

How often does our world try to convince us otherwise! And then Jesus comes along and says, you are worthy, you are good.

My friends, when I arrived ten years ago I brought with me a practice from my church back in Arkansas where the presider would say "Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here." We've adapted that slightly here to say "Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here, you are welcome at God's table."

When we speak of radical welcome, what we are really saying is you are worthy. In the realm of God, you are good, you are welcome, you are worthy. Full stop.

The rest of what Jesus invites us into as followers, the rest of what we do as Church, are practices—ways of being—that help us hone that sense of worthiness, of being in right relationship. All of it is grounded in the emphatic proclamation: You ARE salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world. Let your light shine. You are worthy of God's love. And you have much to offer this broken, hurting world.

Here on this day when we hold our Annual Parish Meeting, we conduct a bit of business necessary for our common life, but we really are about the work of being reminded that we gather, as they did on a hillside long ago, to hear the words of Jesus light on our ears and touch our hearts. To be reminded that the life we share here is worth celebrating, that we follow Jesus so that we might have life and have it abundantly. To be reminded that we are worthy, and it is good for us to be here.

One month from today 30 of us will make our way to that seaside hill in Galilee where Jesus spoke these words. We will go there as we make pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We will hold the hillside space for a time, greeted by

other pilgrims from around the world who remind us that we are part of something larger, ecumenical, global, even cosmic, and we are invited to take our places there to listen and respond. We will hold the space for everyone in this community, and we trust you will hold the space for us here while we are away. We will feel that palpable connection with you and be buoyed by it.

We will celebrate Holy Eucharist there, under the bright Palestinian sky, and amidst the murmur of the masses coming and going, and we will be sure to speak our words of worthy welcome into that sacred air: Wherever you are on your spiritual journey,

you are welcome here, you are welcome at God's table. And I trust those who gather here that same day will hear the same words.

I hope you know that in your bones to be true—that you are welcome, that you are worthy. May it be healing balm for the wounds we bring along with us in life; may it flavor your life with delight and good will to share; and above all, may it be the source of encouragement for you to know the love of God for YOU!



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!