

Epiphany 5 (A)  
February 5, 2017  
Texts: Matthew 5:13-20

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My mom used to enjoy telling a story about a time not long after she and my dad were married. My aunt and uncle were going to come to dinner, and my mom had prepared a big pot of beans and baked a pan of cornbread. It might have been the first time she had ever cooked a big meal for guests all by herself. After sitting down to dinner, my uncle took a big spoonful of beans, and they tasted awful. My uncle said, "Pat, what did you put in those beans?" And she said, "Nothing." Well that was the problem. There was no salt, no seasoning of any kind, so the beans were as bland and tasteless as could be. Telling that story always made my mom laugh. I think she got a kick out of looking back and seeing just how far she'd come, because she was an amazing cook.

I imagine that most every home cook or baker could tell their own story about forgetting the salt—how a loaf of bread baked without salt seemed to taste rather like cardboard, or the soup without salt was simply dreadful. Salt really isn't a nice thing to add to your cooking. It's absolutely essential. Without it, there's no flavor or zest or joy in the meal. And Jesus uses the image of salt to picture for us what it means for us to be people who follow his way of compassion and forgiveness and generosity and humility. You are the salt of the earth. Without the special qualities for building community and repairing relationships that you bring as people of faith, the banquet of life ends up being about as appealing as the white of an egg.

I think it's interesting to realize that Jesus doesn't say, "Get out there and be salt for the earth." Instead, it's a simple statement of fact: You are the salt of the earth. That's what you are already—and it's important to remember who it is that Jesus is speaking to. It's the same group of followers that Jesus was speaking to in our gospel reading last week, with the beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God to make things right in the world. These are not the kind of life situations that people usually think of as blessed. Instead, most people would probably prefer the blessing of wealth over being poor, the blessing of happiness instead mourning, the blessing of great self-confidence rather than being meek. But Jesus invites us to recognize that as long as the human family is chasing and competing for wealth and success and happiness and all the other things that we've been taught to think of as blessings, we'll continue to wind up in the same old place we've always been. Jesus wants us to discover that a truly flavorful and satisfying and joy-filled life is different from what we've been led to believe.

I wonder whether the most helpful way of picturing this is to tell you about some of the people I've known who really were the salt of the earth. Craig was an engineer, he was smart and capable, and had risen to become a division director at his place of work. It was a very competitive setting, but Craig's division was a very humane place to work. I saw it when a mutual friend experienced a tragic death in her family. Craig had his own experiences of grief in life, and he was able to be supportive and understanding. As a division leader, Craig wasn't always focused on himself and how he looked to those above him. Instead, he was gentle and kind, and able to fully attend to the needs of others, so that he made a real difference for the

people who were part of his life. I heard a few years ago that Craig eventually changed jobs, becoming a manager in a different industry, and he made the change because he felt that in this new job his work would be of special benefit to kids, especially kids from low-income families. Craig was the salt of the earth. He made the communities he was part of full of life.

Cathy was a mom, raising an elementary-school aged boy, so she wasn't really looking for a job. But she had volunteered with Habitat for Humanity for several years, and when the local Habitat organization needed a new leader, Cathy agreed to be interviewed. It was no surprise to anyone who knew her when she was offered the job. She said one of the reasons she accepted the job was she wanted her son to learn the value of giving back, that he wouldn't grow up thinking everything was all about him. She wanted him to really see other people's needs, and to appreciate that those needs were as urgent as his own. Cathy was the salt of the earth. She enriched the lives of so many people, and made the community we all shared so much richer.

Ed was my supervisor when I worked as a chaplain at Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. He oversaw the chaplain's office for a huge city hospital, and he could be a very serious man. I suppose it was a reflection of how important he felt the work of the chaplain's office was for patients and their families and also hospital staff. But he also knew how hard chaplaincy work could be, especially dealing with critically ill children, and sometimes tragic deaths. So when any of his chaplains had a particularly hard call, he was there with compassion and wisdom grown from decades of experience. Ed was the salt of the earth. He brought a special kind of understanding and care to the lives of the people he touched.

We live in a very competitive culture, where people are trained to always be comparing themselves to others and to always be striving for more. Being salt of the earth is not competitive. It doesn't require comparisons with how anyone else is doing, or evaluating how much anyone else has. We live in a very individualistic and self-centered culture, where the impulse to focus on one's own needs and wants and desires is reinforced at every turn. But being salt of the earth is about us, not just me. We also live in a generally anxious and unhappy culture—no coincidence, I think. But being salt of the earth means being connected to each other and to God and to creation. That's what helps keep us grounded and alive to what brings joy and meaning, both to us and to everyone who is part of our life.

Life is all about relationships that are full of care and love, about being connected and living with a sense of joy and purpose that is larger than our own self. Salt of the earth people know that. Maybe it's like in cooking—salt is never the main thing. Instead, salt brings the flavors together, bringing out the bright or tangy tastes that come together to make a dish delicious. As salt of the earth people, we don't call attention to ourselves—look how salty we are! Instead, what's important is Jesus' way of love that is acted out in our life together, in how we treat other people, that creates community and connection and makes life rich. Maybe the situation you're in needs compassion or forgiveness, maybe it needs reconciliation. Or maybe love calls for humility and gentleness, or generosity, or boldness in standing up for what is right. But when you're the salt of the earth, you'll know, or at least have an idea of what is needed, because you know it's not all about you. It's us, and what the Spirit of God is doing through you for all of us together to bring healing to God's beloved world. Thanks be to God. Amen.