

Grandma, Salt, and Light

“You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world.”

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

My grandparents were staunch Protestants. At least, I always thought they were. When I was 16, they drove my sister and I in their bright green motor home from Michigan to Texas. I'd just begun dating and had romance on the brain, so I asked Grandma to tell me how they'd met, fell in love, and decided to marry. They'd been in the same elementary class and became high school sweethearts. He went to Purdue; she to Cornell. There were clandestine trips from the Midwest to the East Coast. Deciding to marry wasn't simple, because he and his family – and here, my grandmother's otherwise strong voice dropped to a whisper – were *Catholic*. That ended when they married: he stopped *smoking* and *drinking*, and joined the Presbyterian church. So maybe it's more accurate to say: my grandmother was a staunch Protestant.

I spent many weekends visiting them as a child, which means I spent many Sundays on a wooden pew in their tiny, white Presbyterian church

picking up the not-so-subtle message that my Christian duty was to work hard, both outwardly (in school and work) and inwardly (by striving to become who Jesus wanted me to be). This is how I would know I was among Jesus' elect. This message – that I need to work hard to become who God wants me to be – is the same one I took away from Sundays in my father's Methodist church and summer church camp. No wonder! That's the "Gospel According to the Protestant Work Ethic."

All this to say, when I hear Jesus say "You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world," I feel an uncomfortable tug in my gut as I wonder who he's talking to – 'cause I'm pretty sure it isn't me. I yell at my kids and my cats. I get mad at my husband over the most ridiculous things. I become another person after a meeting goes past the one-hour mark. I spend too much, share too little, and pray too infrequently to be called salt or light. No, I've got a lot more work to do on myself before I qualify as either of those.

So, who are these "salty, light-bearing people" Jesus is addressing?¹

¹ This phrase comes from a sermon preached by Nadia Bolz Weber who also struggles to see herself as salt and light. Her sermon gave voice to the thoughts of my heart this week. You can read it here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/02/sermon-on-that-special-class-of-salty-light-bearing-people-to-whom-jesus-preaches/>.

In our passage today, Jesus has been teaching and healing all over Galilee. Matthew tells us people “brought to him all the sick, ... demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When he saw the crowds,” he sat down and began to teach them. We know his teaching that day as the Sermon on the Mount, and our reading today comes from the heart of that sermon. So, when Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world,” he’s talking the sick he’s cured, the crowds who’ve assembled around him from all over the region, and the disciples. In other words, his audience isn’t filled with people who’ve been working hard to become the people God wants them to be. They’re just people who are drawn to Jesus. Like me. Like you.

Now that we know Jesus really is talking to us, let’s listen closely to what he says:

You **are** the salt of the earth. You **are** the light of the world.

I don’t know about you, but I really need to meditate on two words: “you are.”

You are salt.
You are light.
You are
right now
already
just as you are
salt and light.

I haven't heard that enough in my life. Not in church or at home – not even in seminary. And I don't think I'm alone in this. So this is what Jesus wants us to hear today. You **are** the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So, let's look briefly at these two metaphors.

First, do you know how valuable salt was in the ancient world? It was a form of currency, hence the phrase “she's worth her weight in salt.” Our word “salary” derives from the Latin word *salarium*, which has the root *sal* or salt. Salt has long been a preservative, a disinfectant, a component of ceremonial offerings, and – of course – a seasoning. Salt is an essential nutrient without which we cannot survive. The human body doesn't store salt well, so we need to consume it regularly in order to be able to carry out basic biological processes, like maintaining proper blood pressure, delivering nutrients to and from cells, nerve transmission, and muscle movement. Chef Samin Nosrat, author of *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* (which is a

great book!) says, “salt has a greater impact on flavor than any other ingredient.”² Salt is precious. Salt is life.

And light? The value of light hard in the ancient world is difficult to comprehend in our over-lighted, can’t-see-the-stars-in-the-city-at-night culture. Light that shined in darkness was life-giving and rare in the ancient world. Most homes had only one room and one opening – a door – through which light could enter. After sundown, a small lamp could illuminate that room, but oil was costly and not something to be wasted. Light is needed for plants to grow. Our bodies need light to transform cholesterol to vitamin D. Light is precious. Light is life.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

You are.

Jesus asks: if salt has lost its saltiness, what good is it? If a lamp is hidden under a bushel basket, what good is it? Don’t lose touch with your essential self. Be you. Be who God has already made you. Because the world needs salty, light-bearing people to show up with all the love and joy

² Samin Nosrat, *Salt, Acid, Fat, Heat*, Simon & Schuster 2017.

and talent and energy and compassion we have. And we already have everything we need to do this work: ourselves.

There's one last thing we need to talk about. At the end of our passage, Jesus tells the crowds: "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." There's that tug in the gut again as my mind races away wondering how my righteousness exceeds ... oh wait!

See, Jesus has been trying to teach us about righteousness. He's trying to tell the crowds – and us – that righteousness is not about following the law to a "T" (that's why he calls out the scribes and the Pharisees). Righteousness isn't about working hard to make ourselves into the people God wants us to be. "Human righteousness is about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world."³ As the salt of the earth, we enact righteousness when we allow ourselves to be formed by God's blessings and share them with others. As the light of the world, we enact righteousness when we share our bread with the hungry, care for the homeless poor, and clothe the naked. We enact righteousness when we

³ Marcia Y. Riggs, "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, 5 Epiphany*.

take all the love and joy and talent and energy and compassion we have into the world, especially into those places where despair threatens to snuff out the light of hope.

The Protestant work ethic is strong in me, friends. So strong I wasn't sure I could preach this sermon. "I can't tell them they're salt and light just as they are," I thought, "or they'll walk away without any work to do." We all know we have work to do on ourselves, right? That we have moments when we are salty in all the wrongs ways and habits that prevent our light from shining in the world? We know this about ourselves. E'en so, my message for you today is very simple:

Be salt.

Be light.

Be you.