

You: Salt of the Earth and Light of the World? Really?

Matthew 5: 13-14

"You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." What did Jesus mean?

He didn't say, "You have the *potential* to be salt of the earth." He didn't urge us, "With a little more sprucing up, you *could* become light for the world."

He said it as if it were *already* true. He declared it as if it were obvious. Jesus told the group, huddled before him on the Galilean hillside, "*You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world."

They were no select group. They were just an assortment of people who'd gotten up on an ordinary morning, and made their way to the hillside that day, to hear this man Jesus about whom they'd heard. They got up, just as all of us did on this ordinary morning, deciding – for one reason or another – to make our way here, to King's Chapel.

And then we hear, as those on the hillside did, these odd words: "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth."

Is it true?

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Maybe we're here today because it's our job to be -- singing in the choir, playing the organ, or preaching. Perhaps we had an assignment we'd taken on: ushering or making our lunch. Perhaps attending has become our Sunday habit, or a friend agreed to meet us, or we were visiting from out of town, or were simply curious about what happens in this place.

But however we came to be here this morning, my guess is that you – like those first Galileans – did not come because you were convinced that you are the Light for the World, that already, in this moment now, you are salt of the earth.

More likely, you feel just the opposite. You came because somewhere inside you were more aware of the clouds in your life than the sunlight; you were more wearied by the blandness and routine of your days, than aware of their salty zest. We all tend to come to church hoping for light to be shed on a murky question, wishing for an enriched sense of our life's purpose, one that would be worth savoring.

But now Jesus calls *you* the light, says *you* are already the salt. You have within you and around you all that you need.

Is it true?

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We can't even take solace in being singled out. Jesus hasn't been particularly discriminating. Everyone sitting in these pews, all in the hillside throng receive the same message from him. Regardless of your past, regardless of your future intentions, "You are the light of the world," Jesus tells us all. "You are the salt of the earth."

And when he looks your way saying those words, you glance over your shoulder to see: To whom is he talking? But his eye hasn't left your face. The voice comes again, with a gentleness: You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.

And we wonder "Me?" "Right now?" "Already?"

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From time to time, you may have met people who fit these two descriptors: of light and salt. When they enter a room, it lights up. When you see their script on an envelope, you smile, a ray of sunshine about to be cast into your day when you read the letter enclosed.

When you're in need of a true friend, who will not let you down, you seek the one who is "salt of the earth." Because today when we say someone is "the salt of the earth," we mean that he or she is solid, and humble, and trustworthy. They may not be flashy – not hot spices, making food exotic or burning our lips – not the models airbrushed in ads, but people who can be counted on. People worth knowing. Those whom we call "salt of the earth" are those who will see us through. An "old salt" is the sailor who deserves respect, knows his way around the ship, is one you'd want aboard in a storm.

This doesn't make salt "plain" or "ordinary": salt is remarkable! It changes ordinary food into something tasty. When the seemingly small, single teaspoon of salt is forgotten in the recipe, everyone who tastes it knows immediately. Salt changes things. It makes them so much better.

For people in Jesus' time, salt was a miracle preservative: only in this last split second of human development have we had electric refrigeration – before that, for almost all of human history, it was salt that allowed meats or fish or other food stuff to last. Salt kept families from starving, because they could save and store what they butchered or grew in the seasons of bounty, to eat in their seasons of want. Salt changes things – it makes life so much better.

Salt is a healer, too. When I had a nasty cut on my hand, and wondered if I should swim in the ocean, my sister-in-law, an intensive care nurse at Mass General, told

me salt water would *hasten* its healing. Gargling with warm salted water is recommended for sore throats or colds, and when little babies are congested, small drops of salt water can loosen the mucus so they can breathe again.

“You are the salt of the earth”: Healing. Preserving. Enhancing life. You can make lives so much better, says Jesus.

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On the ancient hillside, and in this place today, Jesus wants us to know our true identity, from God's perspective, our true identity as salt and light.

It's not because of anything we've done, or some creed we espouse. We're salt and light because we're human, made in God's image. By being children of God, loved unconditionally, we're imbued with these qualities: salt and light, able to bring deeper life to lives we touch.

This week a member told me that once he'd walked down a street here on Beacon Hill, and suddenly he was aware of true Reality. For a memorable moment, he *knew* he belonged to something greater; it was a pure joy. True. Real.

When you know who you are, in the deepest sense, when you glimpse Reality, or God, or whatever word or metaphor we grasp at to name it, when we are aware even for an instant of who we were made to be, then everything changes. To know who and whose you are, changes your life, and the lives of those around you, as salt does. As light does.

And when we ignore this true identity, when we forget who we really are, it's an absurdity, says Jesus. He doesn't say that harshly, or with anger. But he's clear: “Dear ones, Why wouldn't you act like the wonderful salt God made you to be – when you forget, it's like treating a precious spice as if it's lost its flavor, throwing it on the ground where it will be trampled like dirt underfoot.

Why wouldn't you act like the beautiful light you are? To ignore your own radiance is as silly as covering a lamp with a bushel – no one would do that! Why, the whole room could be lit by your beauty, by your shining love, so all in the house could see it.

God longs for us to know who we really are: for our good, and the good of all the world. “You are the salt of the earth,” says Jesus, with urgency and wisdom. “You are the light of the world.”

In his life, he'd somehow grasped it. Can we?

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There are many reasons we forget our true natures, reasons why on most days it's hard to imagine any sane person mistaking us for salt or light.

Our true God-given identity may be drowned out by voices insisting otherwise: a school teacher or parent, a drill sergeant or spouse, a minister haranguing from the pulpit or a supposed friend who constantly chides. From all or some of these we pick up this message – even sometimes when it's not intended: You're worthless, like tasteless salt underfoot.

So in time we hide who we are under a bushel: who we really are, or at least some part of ourselves, is unacceptable, we conclude. It happens if we're gay in Russia, or on most sports teams in America. It happens if we're Latino seeking an apartment, and notice that those with whiter names fare far better.

We hide who we are if we didn't go to the right school, or don't earn the right salary, and someone makes us feel the less for it. We work hard at church, but no one thinks to say thanks; we make a blunder in our religious home, and no one will forget. We get the message: you're no longer Salt of the Earth. For right or for wrong, we feel unwanted now, and aren't sure how to change back again, regain our flavor.

Some of us forget we're salt and light, because our body chemistry is awry. It's hard to admit the anxiety that plagues us when family or friends look askance at drugs or therapy. So we struggle on alone, self-medicating as best we can: extra sweet snacks by day, Chablis or scotch at night. But the loop in our brain keeps singing the same refrain: you're no good, you're no good, you're no good.

Sometimes experiences in our lives shout out, You can't be salt or light! If we fought in Viet Nam, and came home to derision and shame. If we're soldiers fighting now, returning to few jobs in the weakened economy. If we've seen death, jumped at bombs' near misses, discovered buddies destroyed, and must just "man up" for yet another grueling tour of duty. What was once called "shell shock," is now known as Post Traumatic Shock, but our soldiers still wait too long for adequate treatment, because we Americans prefer not to pay more taxes.

No wonder some veterans forget that they are "salt of the earth," "the light of the world." They feel trod underfoot, men left on sidewalks, walked past and ignored, their light hidden under bushels, or under mounds of anonymous blankets, asleep at night in our doorways.

There are many reasons we all lose sight of this reality: in God's eyes we are born beloved, valued "salt of the earth," shining light for the world, treasured and precious in God's sight.

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The data are sobering. Of all the homeless men on the street, one of every four is a veteran who's served this country. Someone whose boots were well polished at morning inspection. Who could do the workouts, follow the orders, vault the obstacles, run the race. A vet who signed up or was drafted, and who represented us, defended us, perhaps killed on our command.

And now? Once every hour, an American veteran commits suicide. Once every hour. 22 suicides each day.¹ Right now, most veteran suicides are by those who fought in Viet Nam, but just a few weeks ago, the government reported a vast surge in suicides among the youngest veterans, those still in their teens and twenties. In July, a survey by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America found that 30% of service members in our current wars have considered taking their own life. 45% know another Iraq or Afghanistan veteran who has already attempted suicide. A wave of suicides likely lies ahead, due to the wars of this last decade.²

Jesus says to you and me, and to every veteran considering suicide: You are the salt of the earth, already loved by God. You are the light of the world, because you are God's child.

Can we hear that? Can we say it to someone else, by word or action?

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There *is* good news in this darkness. Thoughtful people are working hard to help fellow Bostonians remember that they are part of our beloved community, salt and light. The Boston Courant, the small local weekly that covers Beacon Hill, Back Bay and the South End, reported this week that Boston's homeless population is now 7255, based on the census taken in December. 7255 homeless right now in Boston. That's up from last year, but because programs have pushed their limits, no one has had to sleep on the streets in our bitter cold.³

The Boston Globe yesterday carried a Business section piece on the Fireman Foundation, an organization deeply committed to ending homelessness.⁴ That Foundation, through its grant criteria, now insists that public services be coordinated. A single mother who loses her job, can't afford her rent, and is forced into a shelter, now might receive comprehensive services to help her regain

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/21/us/22-veteran-suicides-a-day/>

² <http://iava.org/press-room/press-releases/veterans-participate-suicide-prevention-month>

³ The Boston Courant, February 6, 2014; see also http://www.bphc.org/healthdata/other-reports/Documents/2013_2014_Key_Findings_ESC.pdf

⁴ <http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2014/02/08/philanthropy-promotes-coordinated-effort-address-homelessness/K8KuTEy18SUUPfqZj8d22J/story.html>

independence: not only subsidized rent for a new apartment, but at the same time, the child care aid she needs to land a job, and training at Jewish Vocational Services so she can earn more than minimum wage. The Fireman Foundation's goal is to prevent repeated cycles of homelessness.

The New England Center for Homeless Veterans, our neighbor one block away, also provides comprehensive services. They commit to "leave no one behind." You'll hear more of their inspiring work at lunch.

Strategic policy initiatives like these are vital: another organization King's Chapel supports, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, invites all of us to join their lobby day later this month, at the State House. There you can urge legislators to fund homeless programs and programs that prevent homelessness in the first place.

In addition to this systemic work, there is the ministry of presence with individuals. I've learned from the Rev. Joan Murray, who served the homeless on Boston Common for five years with Ecclesia, and now works alongside those on the margins in Waltham. Any of us, who may have forgotten that we are salt or light, can regain our sense of true self when someone shows, by their simple presence with us, that they deem us worth their time. Worth talking and listening to.

One man told Joan later that he had mustered courage to get sober because she'd called him by name, day after day. Joan had no idea, because the man had rarely responded, but he'd felt her presence.

In the ministry of presence, Rev. Murray or the Vets Center invites us to come and be present with their guests. Just to be, playing cards or chatting, just being salt and light, as all of us are, already. Conveying to each other, that all can add to the world, for such marvelous good, like salt and light.

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To be light, shining in all the darkness, to be salt, given scope of the task, we need to come together as beloved community.

Think of a recent Christmas Eve service, or of our Easter Vigil here, times when this church rests in darkness, until one candle is lit. That one lights two more, then all those up this center aisle come ablaze, and the tiered candelabra here in front.

If you've been in a church with long rows of pews on Christmas Eve, you may have seen a mother take a candle, and carefully light the one held in her child's little fist, then you've seen how the child dips hers to light the grandparent's, and on down the row, row after row until a whole sanctuary is warm with flickering light, visible on every wondering face.

Alone my light might light one room, or a corner of one. But together, our light grows spacious, glowing, giving hope to those who've forgotten the true reality, this message: You, too, are the light of the world.

The very first flame is the unquenchable love of God, that enables all else, our true identity, as ones precious in a loving God's sight.

Light can shine throughout a beloved community. A the feast of great joy can be shared, seasoned well by the salt of the earth.

Pass it on. You are the salt of the world. You are the light for the world. And when we come together, as one, oh what a difference God can bring to many lives.

Beginning with yours.

May it be so, dear friends. May it be so!