

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli  
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Communion Recognition, Matthew 5:13-20  
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“You are the salt of the earth.” Growing up, when I heard Jesus’ words, I immediately thought of salt as a flavoring agent. You are what gives the world flavor. Later I learned of salt’s preserving properties and healing properties; it is truly one of the earth’s great resources. No wonder Jesus tells his followers that they are the salt of the earth - they are here to flavor the world, preserve things of value, heal. Except that is not the aspect of salt that Jesus is referring to here in the gospel of Matthew.

The word “earth” here refers to an outdoor earthen oven. Such ovens were common near homes to be used for cooking and heat, but finding kindling was an issue. Just think - if all the houses in your neighborhood had to burn wood to cook, there would not be any trees left in your neighborhood. So they had to burn something else. So they saved what they had in abundance. Animal poop - yes, they saved animal poop. Then, they used the animal poop as fuel, setting fire to it to heat up the stone of their ovens. Little pads with salt on them were used as catalysts to help the poop burn. Eventually the catalytic properties of the salt were burned away so while the white powder of salt was there, it wouldn’t help anything burn. At that point, the salt would be thrown out, into the dirt of the road, and it would be trampled on by people.

You are the salt of the earth. You help poop burn so that it can be a source of warmth and nourishment. Not one of Jesus’ most appealing metaphors but when your life has a lot of extra crap hanging around, it can be helpful to think about it this way. As Christians we can be present with the crappy stuff of life and be a part of its transformation into something life-giving. A traumatic event can become an experience of compassion. A job loss can be ignited into a

soul-searching endeavor that teaches someone about themselves and their values. Failing a big test or messing up a work project can become a productive lesson in humility – none of us are perfect and we are not just what we can accomplish..

But losing our saltiness, that's a problem in this metaphor. The only way to preserve the saltiness is to never use it. Once used, it's gone. That's problematic because I doubt the takeaway from Jesus' teaching is that we should use our faith – our saltiness - only to end up in the street and walked upon by people. Or that we shouldn't use our faith at all. I would say I was reading too much into the metaphor, but Jesus asks the specific question, "If the salt loses its saltiness [which it in the referred to scenario absolutely will] how can it be made salty again?"

How can we be made salty again? When we are tired . . .when we can't muster any more compassion . . . when we feel frustrated and misunderstood . . . when the pile of crap is high and our salt has lost its ability to bring anything good from it – how can we be made salty again?

Jesus jumps to another metaphor - You are the light of the world. Light is fundamentally different than salt. Light is not spent. It does not lose its properties, no matter how long it shines. The predominant source of light in the time of Jesus is the same as ours. It is the sun. That comes up every day. It scatters the darkness every morning. Even when the sky is full of clouds, the light scatters the darkness. You are the light of the world. When you are spent, when you have run out of the power to bring life from the crap of the world, when you cannot muster the strength to ignite, remember who you are.

Some of you may remember the Disney movie, Moana. Like most Disney movies, it's about finding yourself. And there is the wise grandmother figure in it who always encourages Moana to listen to herself even when it comes in tension with what her parents want. The

grandmother dies and Moana goes on this great adventure to save her people, and she gets to the point in it when she is spent. She has taken risks and stood up to demigods and spoken her truth and fought enemies, but she is tired and the journey is not over yet. She is ready to turn around. The ghost of her grandmother comes to her and says it's okay for her to give up, to go home, and then she sings to her, reminds her of the child she was growing up, her love for the seas and her people, and then she sings these words,

“Sometimes the world seems against you

The journey may leave a scar.

But scars can heal and reveal just where you are

The people you love will change you

The things you have learned will guide you

Nothing on earth can silence the quiet voice still inside you.

When that voice starts to whisper, . . . listen – do you know who you are?”

In answering the question, Moana is re-invigorated to continue the journey for her people. In answering the question – do you know who you are? – she finds the strength, the hope, the vision to become salt again.

When Jesus says to his followers, you are the light of the world, he is telling them that who they are is deeply connected to the creation of God – the light that comes again and again and is renewed daily. They are salt that helps burn the struggles of this world into something good and life-giving, but they can't do it alone. They have to also be connected to the light of the world. The light that is renewed day after day. The sky may be thick with clouds, but the light shines through. The night may be frighteningly dark, but the sun will come up in the morning. Every time. It can renew you and remind you who you are.

Not all of us have a grandmother who comes to us in our dreams and sings memorable tunes to help us remember who we are. God has given us other ways to remember who we are. One way that we celebrate every week together - communion. Yesterday a dozen 2nd to 5th graders participated in our communion workshop where we explored the stories and theology and practical matters of communion. This is not a First Communion - as many of you know, in the Episcopal Church, we offer communion to children of all ages but let their parents make the decision for them. This isn't so in every tradition, and wasn't always so in the Episcopal Church. Some of you long-time Episcopalians may remember when you had to be confirmed as a teenager to receive communion. The reason that this changed is that the church thought about it more, and realized that Jesus didn't put any caveats around his teaching to Remember him when they shared in the body and blood. It's part of being a follower of Jesus to be nourished by sharing in this sacrament. It's a gift from God, not something we have to understand to get something out of. Baptism is the sacrament that recognizes us as followers of Jesus so that is the closest we get to as a prerequisite in the church nowadays.

That being said, learning more about communion can enrich our experience of it. Communion Recognition recognizes that our children are growing in their maturity and their understanding of the faith. I'm guessing the adults who came learned something as well. What I really hoped they learned and what I want to share with you is that communion reminds us who we are. Every week. When we've lost our saltiness and need to be reconnected to the light. Or when we just need a little nourishment to sustain us in the long haul that is life. Communion means connection. It connects us to the first disciples and Jesus who told us to do this in remembrance of him. It shows us how to live - Take what we have, ask God to bless it, break it open with one another, and give it away. It's what we do at this table every week. Take Bless

Break Give. It's what we are encouraged to do with our lives in the other days of the week - Take Bless Break Give. It gives us the spiritual nourishment to do it. In a mystery we can't understand, we are strengthened by Christ when we take the body and blood, when we share in the bread and the cup. At our 7:45 traditional service, one of the lines in the communion prayer asks that we may be "made one body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him." The mystery of communion is that that happens. Augustine, one of the great church fathers, taught that communion shows us who we are - the body of Christ - that we may become it. "Behold what you are, may you become what you receive."

Communion reminds us who we are - connects us to it - the body of Christ - that we may become what we receive and live as the body of Christ in the world.

Take Bless Break Give - this day and all the days until we gather again to be reminded, reconnected, and nourished to remember who we are.