



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany V

[RCL] **Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]; Psalm 112:1-9, (10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]; Matthew 5:13-20**

Point to God

Have you ever messed up the salt in a recipe? Whether you're cooking or baking, you know how it goes: Everything is perfectly measured, weighed, balanced. The timing is right; the technique solid.

And then you take that final taste and it's...off. It's either too salty—the mouth-puckering physical reaction of salt on the tongue, followed quickly by the emotional reaction of a ruined dish. Or it's not salty enough—the flavors flat and dull, nothing really distinguishing itself. One-dimensional. Boring.

Few recipes or chefs would advertise a dish by saying, *"This tastes like salt!"* And yet salt is found in nearly everything. Because what salt does best is work with other flavors. It enhances what is already there, draws flavor out, holds flavor together. Yet salt doesn't work in a vacuum, alone on a plate. Salt doesn't work in isolation.

In Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount that we hear today, Jesus calls the people "the salt of the earth." This teaching comes immediately after the Beatitudes, that part where he says, "Blessed are the meek... the merciful... the poor in spirit." Right after these blessings, Jesus tells the people—and us, of course—*You are the salt of the earth.*

Not the hero flavor, but absolutely essential.

He also tells them: "You are the light of the world." And, unsurprisingly, Jesus does not describe a light in isolation, but rather a light that exists for and within the world. He says, *"Let your light shine before others,"* not so that they may admire you, but *"so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."* The light that comes from Jesus's love is not meant to be hidden or hoarded. It cannot exist in a vacuum or in isolation.

The point of the salt is not the salt itself.

The point of the light is not the light itself.

The point is God's glory.

Neither salt nor light makes sense on its own. Salt only works in relationship with other ingredients. Light shines so that others can see. Jesus's metaphors are about community, not individualism. They assume connection, relationship, interdependence: an ecosystem, not a solo performance.

This truth matters because Jesus's teachings—his life, and the many interpretations of what it means to follow him today—can sometimes feel heavy. Christianity can begin to feel like a list of obligations: duties to perform, rules to follow, disciplines to maintain. We may feel the weight of responsibility and effort pressing down on us. Our human

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impulse toward shame and secrecy can make living as a Christian feel like constantly failing a test, as if we are unworthy of grace and love because we haven't done enough, or done well enough. The cycle of guilt can be lonely and isolating.

But remember the Collect appointed for today: "Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*" It speaks not of burden, but of freedom. Liberty. Abundance.

Even within that tightrope walk of relationship and responsibility, there is freedom.

The prophet Isaiah lays right into it. He calls out religious leaders who have leaned too far into obligation and legalism, but forgotten the abundant spaciousness that comes from God. He names the fasting, self-inflicted oppression, and penitence that serve only one's own self and reputation. Spiritual disciplines like fasting and penitence can be healthy, meaningful, and life-giving, but only if they point to God.

The messages we receive from the prophet Isaiah and the Messiah Jesus are the same: Do not perform righteousness for show. Don't act so that people can see your good works, but to give glory to God in heaven. Let your actions loosen the bonds of injustice. Let them feed the hungry, shelter the oppressed, and clothe the naked.

The freedom we seek as Christians, as followers of Christ, is bigger than ourselves, and our own self-righteousness. The goal of our life isn't to be free in the sense of being able to do whatever we want, without consequence. The freedom we seek—through our spiritual practices and prayers and worship and teaching and learning—is freedom from oppression for *all*.

What good is fasting if we ignore the hungry?

What good is penitence if we ignore those who are tortured?

What good is religious devotion if we turn away from the poor, the lonely, the sick, the forgotten?

The freedom we desire is that *all people* may know they are loved, safe, protected, and nourished—spiritually, yes, but also physically, emotionally, and mentally. If we are all connected in the spiritual ecosystem of this broken and hurting world, then one person oppressed affects each one of us.

It is tempting to leave the reading from Matthew with the image of the city on a hill. But after his discussion of salt and light, Jesus cautions us against taking God's freedom as a free-for-all. The freedom Jesus brings isn't to say that "none of those old laws matter anymore," but rather to remind us that the law must always point to God. Jesus is famous for re-interpreting the ancient religious law in ways that challenge religious leaders, and that's the kind of freedom he brings when he says, "*I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*" He's saying, follow the law. Do the rites and rituals. They matter. But don't do it for show, for self-righteousness, or for attention. They only matter when they serve justice and life for the whole world.

Does your life point to God's freedom?

Look at your calendar—how you spend your time.

Your budget—how you spend your money.

Your relationships—who receives your energy and care.

The way you travel, where you shop, how you vote, who you listen to and speak with.

Do these choices point toward the glory of God in heaven?

Do they bring love and justice for the poor, the oppressed, the lonely, the sick?

Look at your spiritual practices.

Your prayer life—does it exist only privately, or only at the dinner table when guests arrive?

Your Bible study—does it draw you deeper into Scripture and community, or become another excuse for gossip?

Your intentions/fasts/resolutions—do they bring you closer to God, or are you using religious disciplines as an excuse to diet?

The ways we welcome, serve, learn, and connect at church matter. All of our rites and rituals, our traditions and beliefs, are gifts that God has given to us. They simply must point to God, and not ourselves (or our buildings, our legacy, our reputation).

We have been set free from self-righteousness, from the tally sheet of sin, from the law of restriction, by Jesus Christ, through his radical, world-shaking love. We are neither heroes nor expendable—but we are essential in the community of God's church and God's world.

Whatever we do, may we do it in such a way that all glory is given to God in heaven.

The Rev. Anna Sutterisch is passionate about new ways of being and doing church, and is excited about sharing the Gospel in a way that is relevant and life-changing to today's people in today's world. Rev. Anna holds degrees in English and Viola Performance from Baldwin Wallace University and Conservatory, and is a proud graduate of Bexley Seabury Seminary, where she serves on the Board of Directors. She is honored and humbled to serve as the priest at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Chagrin Falls, a small, strong congregation that loves liturgy, God, and our neighbors, and tries to bring Christ's light and life into a broken and hurting world. She lives in Cleveland with her spouse (also a parish priest), their two small boys, and two cats, and loves to run, cook, and eat vegetables.



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