

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Epiphany 5 (A) ~ 8 February 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalm 112:1-9
Matthew 5:13-20

Let us pray:

*You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness bring the life of Christ to mind,
that by our response and service earth its destiny may find, Amen.¹*

I.

Good morning, Beloved of God. As we begin our time of reflection together today, I would be grateful if you would please turn to page 12 of your worship bulletin.

I invite you to follow along as I read from the Great Thanksgiving, our Eucharistic (Communion) Prayer; I'm beginning just below the *Sanctus*, just under the music:

Blessed are you, gracious God, creator of the universe and giver of life. You formed us in your own image and called us to dwell in your infinite love. You gave the world into our care that we might be your faithful stewards and show forth your bountiful grace.

But we failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love.²

¹ Fred Kaan, "For the Healing of the Nations"

² Eucharistic Prayer 1, *Enriching Our Worship*

There, in the space of just two short paragraphs, is a summation of God's intention for us...and our response. We have been *called to dwell in God's infinite love*, and instead

We violate God's creation, abuse one another, and reject God's love.

Put this way, our story sounds tragic, doesn't it? If we step out of ourselves just for a moment and examine human history and the trajectory of our behavior (somewhat) objectively, it isn't difficult to see the pattern played out over and over and over again – to this very day.

It's enough to make one cry. Or, at the very least (one hopes), repent.

God's intention.

Our response.

We were created for so much, yet we resort to so little.

I am not saying this to beat any of us up this morning. Lord knows, life is challenging enough without your pastor standing here telling you what a lowly worm you are!

At the same time, we don't do ourselves or anyone else any favors if we do *not* stop and take a long, hard, realistic look at ourselves. In a few minutes we will have an opportunity to do that collectively, liturgically, in the words of the General Confession. We will ask forgiveness for "things done and left undone," and we will be assured of God's pardon.

This is Who God is, in the face of all that we do – over and over again – to let God down. As the Eucharistic Prayer continues,

Yet you never ceased to care for us, and prepared the way of salvation for all people.

A lot hangs on that "yet." Despite all that we do to betray and disappoint God, God never ceases to care for us.

What's wrong with this picture?

St. Paul asks, poignantly, in his Letter to the Romans,

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? By no means! (Rom. 6:1-2a).

No, friends. It's time to get our act together. It's time to start living into and up to our intended purpose, to God's vision for each one of us.

II.

In today's Gospel, Jesus continues with what is probably His best-known teaching in all of Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the Beatitudes, a reminder of those sorts and conditions of people whom God especially blesses:

- the poor in spirit;
- those who mourn;
- the meek;
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;
- the merciful;
- the pure in heart;
- the peacemakers;
- those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake;

and

- those who are reviled and persecuted and slandered for being followers of Jesus.

(As the old saying goes, *If we were arrested for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?* I'll just leave that there.)

This morning, Jesus continues His sermon, addressing the crowds who have come out from all the region of the Galilee to listen to Him. It's worth remembering that Jesus isn't in Jerusalem here, speaking to the high and mighty and powerful in the Temple or the court of King Herod. He's in the country, up in the north, near the border of Gentile territory. In the previous chapter Matthew says that Jesus has been "teaching in [the] synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Mt. 4:23).

These are the very folks who have gathered to hear Jesus: the poor, the sick, the fishermen, the farmers, many who are just struggling to get by, day after day.

And what does Jesus have to say to them?

You are the salt of the earth!

When we hear this expression today, we're likely to interpret it to mean someone who is hard working and faithful, upstanding and reliable, an example to be emulated by the rest of us.

I can think of several members of this very congregation we might describe this way.

Is this what Jesus is getting at here?

Maybe. *And...*

Remember that in the ancient world, even more so than today, salt was a very *valuable* commodity. Then, as now, salt was used for seasoning, but it also was an essential *preservative* and *purifier*.³

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20-6>

We take salt for granted as abundant and easily accessible: Go to any restaurant, and there is a shaker just sitting there, waiting for us, ready to be used as we see fit. (Is anyone else hearing strains of Jimmy Buffett right now?)

But in Jesus' time, His audience would have understood and appreciated His meaning immediately. Calling them "the salt of the earth" was a high compliment.

You have value! He tells the crowds. *You have purpose!* *You are needed!*

And not just individually, but collectively: As one commentator notes, "one molecule [of salt] isn't particularly useful." This is a *plural* you (*y'all*) who are the salt of the earth!⁴

Think about the implications here. Jesus is telling the poor in spirit, the meek, those in mourning, etc., etc., etc., that they have *value* and *purpose* and, when they come together as individual "molecules," they have power.

Imagine the consequences of that language for the people gathered to listen to Him.

The biblical scholar David Lose, who currently serves as a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis, of all places, writes this:

Children... become what they are named. Call a child bad long enough, and he or she will believe you and act bad. Call a child (or teen or adult for that matter) worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she – all of us! – will live into the name we've been assigned. In the same way, call us good or useful, dependable, helpful, or worthwhile, and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well.⁵

We know this, intuitively, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded from time-to-time.

Words matter. They can tear down, *and* they can build up.

⁴ <https://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2011/02/matthew-513-20.html>

⁵ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/salt-light>

So for Jesus to call this crowd “the salt of the earth” isn’t just flattery, or empty campaign rhetoric. It means something.

Likewise, the “light of the world.” Think about the difference light can make. I was reminded of this this past week, when the sun finally came out again after several dreary gray days: Suddenly I saw every fingerprint on my appliances and every mote of dust on the furniture. I should be careful what I wish for, because sometimes light reveals things I don’t necessarily want to see!

But light also makes visible that which has been forgotten, or overlooked, or seemingly lost – including the poor in spirit, and the meek, those in mourning, etc., etc., etc.

To *be* the light, then, is at the same time to expose those aspects of human behavior that we would just as soon suppress, *and* to illuminate and uplift those whom the world chooses not to see.

In calling the crowds “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” Jesus is pointing to, and underscoring, their identity as Children of God. He is breathing new life into their self-understanding as inherently valuable, full of worth, beloved by God and precious in God’s sight.

With purpose, and “dignity,” to borrow language from our Baptismal Covenant.⁶

Called to dwell in God’s infinite love – just like you and I.

III.

I suspect that you see where I am going with all of this.

Human dignity took a spectacular hit – again – this week.

⁶ *Book of Common Prayer*, 305.

I would like to think that it was an isolated incident, a thoughtless gaffe, one public leader perpetuating hateful, demeaning, blatantly racist rhetoric used to devalue another.

But it isn't isolated, is it? If it were, it *might* be easier to excuse, or explain away, if not forgive.

It's not.

As angry, as *sickened*, as I am – as so many of us are – by a disgusting video that someone took the time to create and others saw fit to disseminate, such evil cannot be discounted as the action of one person or even of a misguided few.

What was revealed this past week is symptomatic of a larger, more insidious issue, a disease that infected our society long ago and must not be allowed to spread one day more.

Let me be clear: The prevalence of the problem does not excuse the individual behavior...*And*:

Yes: We all have failed to honor God's image in one another and in ourselves.

No: We will not see God's goodness in the world around us.

Yes: We have violated God's creation, abused one another, and rejected God's love.

We do it every day.

We were created for so much more than this my friends, yet we resort to so little.

We are meant to be salt and light in our world. We have value and worth and dignity and purpose – *as does every human being*.

EVERY human being.

It is time to stop being polite Episcopalian. It is time to stop worrying about offending others by saying nothing. We must call out this behavior – no matter the source, no matter the perpetrator – as unacceptable. Beyond the pale. Intolerable.

It is time to get our act together. It's time to start living into and up to our intended purpose, to God's vision for us – individually, yes, but even more importantly, collectively. One molecule of salt isn't particularly useful.

We have the power. Please God, let us use it.

Amen.