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Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-12

A FORCE WITHIN

When I was in seminary I participated in a hospital chaplaincy internship program. It was a program that took seminarians like me and offered intense training in pastoral care. Each one of us interns was assigned a couple floors of the hospital. It was our job to minister to the patients on those floors. This would entail dropping by each room and introducing myself to the patient, asking if they wanted a visit, inviting them to talk, if they wished, about their health issues, their feelings, their fears, their thoughts about God, and offering to pray with them. I remember my first experience in making a visit to a patient's room. I was so nervous, that I must have circled around the nurse's station ten times before I found the courage to enter that room. After all, who was I to just pop in on this patient? Who was I to ask them about their life and their deepest concerns? Who was I to offer prayer and most importantly, what would I even *say* in my prayer? I felt extremely inadequate for the responsibility in front of me. And to be honest, that feeling hung on for a long time. And it can still rear its head.

We have all heard about the sin of pride—the tendency to think too much of oneself. But what about the opposite error—the feelings of inadequacy that can paralyze us from taking action because we don't feel we are capable or qualified or that we might fail? We all feel inadequate from time to time, often when we are faced with a task that is unfamiliar to us, one we've never done before. Consider a time when you recently felt inadequate about something you were supposed to do, or a project you were to undertake. Was there someone or something that helped you find some measure of confidence that enabled you to move beyond those feelings of inadequacy?

Our reading from Matthew's gospel today focuses on Jesus teaching his disciples in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus conveys to his followers a great measure of confidence he has in them.

Jesus says to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth." And then later, "You are the light of the world."

Let's remember just exactly who Jesus is speaking to. Jesus' disciples are uneducated poor people. They are ruled by an extremely oppressive foreign power—the Roman Empire. And this Empire's cruelty makes it very clear how powerless the Jewish people are, how worthless their lives are in the eyes of the Empire. Jesus' disciples and their families struggle for daily survival.

But Jesus now gathers his disciples together and says to them: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." The two metaphors Jesus uses to describe his disciples were ordinary but essential components to life. Obviously, salt is an ingredient used to flavor food, but more importantly, salt is a necessary ingredient for the health and functioning of our bodies. In Jesus' day, salt was also a valued commodity for other reasons. In some parts of the ancient world, salt was used as currency. Salt was also used to symbolize the sealing of covenants and contracts. Salt carried religious meaning and was used to season incense used in worship and offerings presented to God. And of course, we know that salt is a preservative for foods and how important that was in an era before refrigeration.

In a similar way, we might consider the importance of light in an era before electricity was harnessed. As soon as the sun set, ancient peoples were plunged into darkness. Darkness could provide cover for dangerous elements—be they animals or people. But then add light.

And the light enables people to see, to protect themselves from harm, to find their way without injuring themselves.

Salt and light are important, even essential elements. Jesus tells his followers, these powerless, uneducated, unsophisticated people—like salt and light, you are essential and valuable. But Jesus displays even greater confidence in his disciples. He doesn't just say, "you are essential and important to your family members," or that "you are valuable and have worthy contributions for your village." No! Jesus tells these backwater fishermen, "You are the salt *of the earth* . . . you are the light *of the world*." I have to imagine there was some degree of laughter that erupted after his remarks. Are you serious, Jesus?

And yet Jesus' confidence in his followers remains strong. Notice something else in what Jesus says. He tells his disciples, "You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world." Jesus does not say, "With enough effort and study, one day you may *become* the salt of the earth." He does *not* say, "With prayer and practice you might finally be worthy of being the light of the world." Rather Jesus tells his followers, "You *are* the salt; you *are* the light." Right now. Jesus expresses his confidence that his followers have within them right at that moment the capacity to be essential, important people for the world. The world.

As followers of Jesus, we have to believe that Jesus has this same confidence in you and in me. Within us lies the capacity to offer something essential and important to this hard and harsh world we live in. We have the capacity within us to flavor the world in distinct ways, to shine something of value into this world.

How is this possible? It is possible when we extend the love of God. The prophet Isaiah tells his people in our other reading today that when they care for the homeless, when they feed

the hungry, when they work for justice, when they care for the vulnerable, then “your light shall break forth like the dawn . . . and your light shall rise in the darkness.”

God’s force of goodness lies within you right now. Certainly we can nurture this force of goodness; we can come to church and surround ourselves with a community that helps us tap into that force of goodness; we can get better at letting that goodness out. But we don’t have to wait to find it. It is already there. *You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world. Within you lies God’s force of goodness—a force that is essential for this world. Your love is essential for this world. Your forgiveness is essential for this world. Your compassion, your justice seeking, your capacity for hope, your generosity—these are all essential for this world. Like salt and light.

Jesus wasn’t just speaking to his followers as individuals but as a collective. Jesus uses the plural “you” in this teaching. So as a group, as a community, they were salt and light for the world.

There is a lot of discouragement in mainline churches today as we witness declining membership in our congregations and the loss of social status in our communities. It can be tempting to focus on the numbers and to measure our success on how many new members we can attract. Of course, we all want vibrant and vital congregations.

But membership numbers were never among Jesus’ priorities. He spoke to twelve followers. Twelve. And he commissioned them to flavor the world with God’s love; to brighten the world with the light of God’s goodness. Our concern as followers of Jesus is faithfulness, not effectiveness. We are called to be faithful to the way of Jesus Christ, and to leave the results up to God. But faithfulness to God’s way, however small, is indeed powerful. Even trace amounts of salt and light have an important impact. Jesus encourages us to be “a contrast

community.” Don’t just blend in. Be a distinct community of love and generosity, of compassion and justice. When the world dwells in darkness, shine the light of God. When the world is flavored by ugliness, season it with God’s love. When the world is divisive and hateful, carry out actions of peace and reconciliation. When the world embraces lies and leaders who lie, stand for the truth.

Jesus warns us not to hide God’s light within our hearts, not to hide it by expressing good intentions that are never acted upon because of our insecurities or feelings of inadequacy. Be the light, he tells us! The world needs you to be the light. Be the light in your small part of this globe. Be the salt! Don’t withhold seasoning your daily life with what the world desperately needs: more love, more grace, more compassion, more kindness.

Too often we underestimate ourselves and our importance. Jesus didn’t begin his ministry by calling the powerful and the most accomplished. He started with regular people. And he had confidence that within them, within you, resides the capacity to be extraordinary people who can offer God’s presence in important ways. He knew you have the capacity to flavor this world and change this world with love.