

Be Salty
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“Be Salty” Pilgrim Church UCC, February 5, 2017, (Matthew 5:13-20) Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

There’s this great book I’m reading called *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by Father James Martin—he’s a Jesuit priest and an editor at *America* magazine. It’s a fascinating work that explores Jesus as he appears in the Gospels and through the lens of James Martin’s education, experience, prayer, and a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. When contemplating Jesus teaching his followers, Martin muses that Jesus was a worker before he embarked on his itinerant ministry. There’s an early Christian tradition that Jesus as a *tekton* (the Greek word we translate into English as woodworker or carpenter) could have even fashioned yokes for oxen. In Jesus’ day only the most talented among the *tektons* would have made yokes because they couldn’t cause chafing or discomfort for the oxen as they went about their important work for families to make a living. So James Martin wonders “When Jesus said, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light,’ did people of his day, who knew what an easy yoke was, smile to themselves and say, ‘Yes, he did make good yokes’? Was he subtly playing on their knowledge of his background?”[1] It’s a fascinating line of questioning. How did Jesus’ early life, his experiences of people and the world shape the teacher he became and the lessons he would share with all of us?

Jesus didn’t get baptized by John and set off on his own until he was thirty years old. Some call the time between the story we have about Jesus as a twelve-year-old in the Temple (in Luke’s Gospel) to the time we find him in the wilderness with John his “Hidden Life.” Let’s take a time-out. Think about the years of your life from the age of 12 to the age of 30. Anything important happen in those 18 years? Anything at all? It’s a rather formative time. People may find a partner and settle down or get married and have kids. Finish advanced degrees. Begin their careers. Move to new places. Begin setting out on your own life however that looks. We don’t know exactly what Jesus was up to during those incredibly important years of his life.

Scholars use history, archeology, biblical geography, and other fields of study to try to piece together what Jesus’ life would have been like during his “Hidden Life”—Jesus’ adolescence into younger adulthood. We can ask what it was like in Nazareth. Well we know that daily existence was perilous because according to Historical Jesus Scholars like John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, “Most skeletal remains predictably show iron and protein deficiencies, and most had severe arthritis. A case of the flu, a bad cold, or an abscessed tooth could kill. Life expectancy, for the luckier half that survived childhood, was somewhere in the thirties. Those reaching fifty or sixty were rare.”[2] Jesus lived in a time when everyday existence was harder than any of us can probably fathom. If you lived to thirty you were lucky to have survived childhood. Though on a less depressing note, we know from excavating the small stone dwellings in Nazareth that people lived and worked close together. There must have been a sense of belonging to your family and your village—a deep sense of community. That even if times were hard and life itself wasn’t guaranteed past a rather young age for our modern sensibilities anyway, you had one another. You relied on the grace of God to get you through the hard stuff.

Bearing all of this in mind, we turn to the Gospel of Matthew and hear Jesus say to his followers: “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”[3] The followers of Jesus really were the salt of the earth in the sense that we may use the phrase today—humble, thoroughly decent. Jesus was from a backwater town not even mentioned in

the Old Testament and that background shaped him. Where I'm from if someone's referred to as "salt of the earth" it's meant as a high compliment. I'll tell you what Jonathan is salt of the earth. That means that Jonathan is a good, trustworthy person who is down to earth and doesn't put on airs. These traits are admirable—being the salt of the earth is who you want to be.

This metaphor also deals with Christian discipleship and the part we have to play as children of God. Telling the disciples that they are the salt of the earth suggests that they can bring the goodness and flavor out of others. For cooks among us, you've probably heard the cooking instruction to "salt to taste." Salt as a seasoning can reduce bitterness and brings out the flavor of other, more subtle ingredients. When used correctly, salt may be the only ingredient you need to add to a dish, and all of a sudden it tastes fabulous!

In Jesus' day and age, salt preserved food and made it last longer. Our modern word "salary" comes from the word "salt." Some workers (including Roman soldiers) may have been partly paid for their labor in salt. Others relate that soldiers were given a special sum of money to then go buy salt. Either way, salt was vital to ancient people and Jesus tells us that we are to be the salt of the earth and we have to keep our saltiness intact. That meant more to his disciples back then, but we can bring out good flavors today. We can reduce bitterness and help balance the world.[4] In tumultuous, uncertain times like these it could be easy to get bitter. Jesus calling us to be the salt of the earth gives us courage.

Furthermore what's wrong with being a little salty when you're standing up for what you feel in your heart is right? A guy I went to high school with called me "salty" a few days ago on facebook actually and my older/protective sister came to my defense by saying that she's salty too. Sometimes saltiness is required to be true to yourself. If you don't stand for something you may fall for anything. Remember that Jesus reminds us that if salt loses its taste it's not good for anything—it's thrown out and trampled under foot. No thank you—still going to be my salty self over here!

Jesus also tells us: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." [5] Marcia Riggs (an Ethics Professor from Columbia Seminary) reflects on Jesus' words by saying, "Light enables us to see things and is a kind of energy that gives things color, helps vegetation to grow, provides solar power for electricity, and can be focused for specific uses, such as a laser. Like light, the disciples as a gathered community have the overarching purpose of being the mirror that refracts God's light so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy." [6] When we work together in a gathered community, we can help to engage the world much better than we can on our own. We are to be salt and light, working individually and collectively to spread God's love.

These verses from Matthew are also a bit of an admonishment or at least a gentle prodding to put ourselves out there. What's the point of salt that doesn't taste salty anymore? What's the point of hiding a light underneath a basket so you can't even see its rays? Sometimes you gotta be salty. Sometimes you gotta shine your light. We can do so in ways that doesn't disparage other people of course. Though Jesus is telling us today as his disciples to be salt and light—salty for all to experience and shining for all to see. We can bring out some good flavors in the world and counter bitterness and despair. We can shine light on a broken world, drawing people to the radiance of God among us.

At the end of the day, when we are truly grounded in God and get courage from the relationship we have with Jesus—there's no telling what challenges we can face head on.

Being salt and light isn't about our own personal satisfaction. Being salt and light is about working individually and together to fulfill the law as Jesus commands. Working side by side to love God with our entire beings and love our neighbors and love ourselves. So don't be afraid to be a little bit salty and shine your light for all to see in these days and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] James Martin, SJ, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, 90.

[2] John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed as quoted by James Martin, SJ in *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, 77.

[3] Matthew 5:13, NRSV.

[4] Marcia Y. Riggs, "Theological Perspective" on Matthew 5:13-20 in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, 332.

[5] Matthew 5:14-16.

[6] Riggs, "Theological Perspective" on Matthew 5:13-20 in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, 332-334.