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Matthew 5:13-20

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

God has great confidence in you. Right now, just as you are this minute, God is certain of your capacity to be very important, to do important things, to make a difference in this world.

How do I know this? Scripture says so. Jesus has been traveling throughout Galilee with his small band of disciples. And he has been teaching in the synagogues, preaching about God's kingdom, proclaiming good news, and healing people from all kinds of infirmities. Remember what Jesus' world looks like. Most people are very poor. They are ruled by the very cruel Roman empire. They struggle to survive. Life is very hard. But Jesus travels around the region making a profound difference in people's lives: healing their bodies and bringing hope and good news to their weary spirits. And then he goes up a mountain and gathers his disciples around him and begins to teach them and the crowds listening to him. And he tells them something significant. He tells them: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." He doesn't say to them, "With a lot of work and effort you can *become* the salt of the earth," or "With practice you can *become* the light of the world." No. Instead he tells his followers and the crowds, "You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world." Already. Right now.

And salt and light were two very important elements. They still are but we today take them both for granted. Salt is a necessary component for life. Our bodies need salt to survive. The trouble today, however, is that most of us get an excessive amount of salt from our Western junk food diet. Some of us may even be in need of reducing our salt intake. Nutritionists may have some of us believing that salt is the enemy. But in Jesus' day, salt was a greatly valued commodity. Of course, salt was important in flavoring foods, as it is today. 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, consider the importance of light, particularly in an era before electricity. When the power went out in our home recently, we were plunged into darkness. And we were made keenly aware of how helpless we are in the dark. We needed light. Light enables us to see and to find our way. Light protects us from harm.

Salt and light are important elements. And Jesus tells us, his followers: you are salt; you are light. Right now. Remember how Jesus went about calling his disciples? He walked up to complete strangers and said to them, "Follow me." He didn't interview them to see if they could be salt or light. He didn't ask to see their qualifications to learn if they had any special capacities to be salt or light. He just called them and then declares to them, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." He had confidence that they already had within them the capacity to be salt and to be light. And Jesus has confidence that you and I also have the same capacity within us.

What Jesus is teaching his followers and the crowds gathered around him is they have the capacity to be something important in their hard and harsh world. They have the capacity to live in distinct ways, to flavor their world with a distinct flavor--the flavor of God; to shine out a light into people's darkness--the light of God. They have the capacity to make an important difference to their world.

This would have been an important message not only for those gathered around Jesus but for the people to whom Matthew wrote his Gospel. Matthew wrote his gospel some 50 years

after Jesus' death and resurrection. He wrote to people living in a time of uncertainty and tension. Their broader Jewish community was filled with divisions and there were questions about whether these followers of Jesus would be accepted or rejected by those vying for power and control. Matthew writes his gospel account to support this early Church and to encourage them to become a "contrast society," a community that was distinct from their surrounding world.

So Matthew reminds this early Church about Jesus' words: you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. In place of cruelty, instead of rejection, instead of greed and selfishness, in place of hatred and resentments, in place of getting ahead at the expense of others, or hoarding what you have in case there may not be enough, Jesus tells his followers that they are to live as a contrast society. They have the ability to flavor the world with God. They have the ability to shine out the light of God. Jesus teaches his followers, both the ancient as well as us modern followers, how to live in a difficult world. When the world gives you darkness, shine the light of God. When the world is flavored by ugliness, season it with God's love.

Our society today shares more than a few similarities with Matthew's community. Our nation is rife with divisions and hostilities. Tensions could hardly be higher within our land about who is accepted, who is rejected, who holds the power, who should be forced out of power. Why worry about foreign enemies when the dangers come from within our society? Many feel great anxiety about what they see taking place in our nation, about who is being hurt, about policies that ignore global realities, about the ugliness that seems to be rising to the surface.

The light of decency is dimming. The light of respect is nearly extinguished by hate and discrimination. The light of compassion sputters to burn in a land where children are locked in cages. The light of truth is at an all-time low.

But Jesus says to us, his followers: "Be the light." Be the light. Make sure the light is not hidden away within your hearts, or within your good intentions that never are acted upon, or because of your insecurities. Be the light! The world needs you to be the light. Be the light in your small part of this globe, even if that small part only includes work, home, school, the grocery store, church, community groups, your sports team. Be the light.

Be the salt! Don't hold back on seasoning this world with what it desperately needs: more love, more grace, more compassion, more kindness. The world needs what you have to offer.

How are we to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth in a dark and bitter world? We look to Jesus. We follow Jesus. So we hold fast to the truth. And we honor the vulnerable, the poor, the very young and the very old. We welcome the immigrant, the stranger, the refugee as if we were welcoming Jesus himself. We champion justice and fairness, speaking up for people of all races, religions, genders, and orientations. We remain open to learning something new and even how we might be wrong about something. We share what we have and live simply. We see each person's humanity and do not treat them as means to an end. We offer to help. We strive to forgive. We live in hope.

Jesus calls us to be a contrast society. That's the role of us as a church. We are a contrast community in a world that adheres radically different values. We don't know what this election year will bring about. But we do know who Christ calls us to be in the midst of sometimes dark and bitter times: be the light; be the salt.

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 because he knew there resided within them the capacity to be extraordinary people, important people who could offer God's presence in extraordinary and important ways. He knew they could flavor the world and change the world with love.

In the midst of the bitterness, in the midst of the darkness we see around us in our nation and our world, we may be tempted to hate those we see doing horrible things or to give in to despair. But if we do, if we do, we will have lost the flavor of God, we will have lost our saltiness, and instead we will take on the bitterness of the world. Jesus tells us we are God's important people: those who are salt; those who are light. And you are needed in this world.

It is important we remember this as we ordain and install new officers to serve our congregation. Those we install as our officers are not surrogates for us in this life of faith but rather leaders who are committing themselves to helping the rest of us remember who we are: we are Christ's salt and we are Christ's light. We are to be God's contrast community of hope.

Never forget that God has great confidence in you. God is certain of your capacity to offer what is so essential to this world.