

Last week, our youth, led by Meg Davenport and Mother Bonnie, performed a wonderful short play to help us better understand the Gospel passage commonly known as the Beatitudes. If you missed it, you really lost an opportunity to see some of our youth reveal their talents; and also an opportunity to better understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In today's world, really as in all times and places, our understanding of the gospel and how we respond to it are so important. What the play did was spur our sacred imagination of what might have been going on as Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount. We know from Scripture that there were people around him of different ethnicities and religions, from different social and economic classes, and with conflicting identities and motivations for how they lived and for what they were willing to fight and even die.

What was so different about Jesus is that he did not simply chose sides in the battles of life. **Instead, he pointed to a different way of being human.** The revelation of his whole life and teaching, his miracles and healings, his death, resurrection, and ascension offers those with ears to hear a different perspective about the meaning of life. You see, a life of faith, a faithful life, is not about our side winning and the other side losing. It is about following a Lord who reveals God's grace for all people and God's intention for people to flourish as promised by the prophets of old.

We get this in the opening line of today's Gospel. It follows right after the Beatitudes that we heard and saw performed by the youth last week. It may seem strange in some ways, though we have probably heard and repeated the opening phrase many times in our lives:

*"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 underfoot."*  
(5:13)

In our American English use of this phrase, "Salt of the earth," we usually mean someone is "good people," that is, someone we can count on to do the right thing. The way Jesus offered the entire phrase, he seemed to say that participating in the way of life Jesus has just described in the Beatitudes will make us salty people—that is, people who bring flavor to life and helps to preserve what truly matters as we follow Jesus as our Lord.

Conversely, Jesus indicated that losing that saltiness that comes from following him will make us useless for the purpose for which God made and saves us. And we know that the only way for salt to lose its saltiness is to be diluted. So if in living our faith, we become diluted in how we understand, believe, and follow the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are unable to give flavor to life and preserve it as our Lord commands.

If this is true and truly important, how can we avoid becoming diluted? How can we stay “salty”? The key seems to be how we understand and follow the Law. In the same passage for today, our Lord said that the Law is important—that he did not come to do away with the 613 commandments culled from the Hebrew Scripture. But he did come to *clarify* what the purpose of the Law is.

You see, Law—whether the Law from the Hebrew Bible or any set of laws, human or religious—Law can be misused in such a way that it actually defeats its purpose. Jesus talked about this later in Matthew’s Gospel when he said of religious leaders of his day:

*“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” (23:4)*

When we focus on keeping the details of the law and ignore its deeper purpose, we dilute our saltiness. In Jesus day, that meant stigmatizing people who did not follow the rules that the religious leaders told them were important.

Examples of how Jesus exceeded the letter of the Law in order to fulfill its true purpose are repeated throughout the accounts of Jesus’ ministry. For instance, we are told over and over how Jesus would heal on the Sabbath—that is, do work that violated the rules according to the religious leaders of his day. His acts of compassion outraged the people in charge. And we’re told that their responses made Jesus angry. Beyond healing on the Sabbath, Jesus and his followers would even break Sabbath rules for simple human convenience. We’re told his disciples would pick and eat grain in the fields on the Sabbath when they were hungry. Jesus and his first followers were definitely salty!

Jesus would also hang out with the people that religious folks said should be ostracized because they did not follow the Law. He went to parties with people who were labeled by religious leaders as sinners. He spent time with people who were despised-- foreigners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. And we’re told they responded to his kindness and challenge to live differently. They were so used to being neglected and judged by religious people that when Jesus embraced and included them, they flourished! Jesus was salty and he made salty people.

Today parts of the church have lost their saltiness. Too often we stay away from the people that Jesus would hang out with. Too often people of faith hold up our rules and look down on those who do not follow them or agree with us. The church will continue to be challenged today like it has been over the centuries and like religious people were challenged in Jesus’ day. How we respond will determine our ability to bring flavor to life and preserve it.

Let me tell you a brief story to help explain what I mean. Some of you know that I rode down to the airport on MARTA after services last Sunday. It was a spur of the moment decision. During the ride down, the train became very full. A young woman sat down next to me and we began talking. She asked what we were doing and I told her. She said, “I should really join you,

but I am just getting off work and I need to go get my son.” I told her being a working mom is a very full plate and very important. But she still felt bad about not joining us.

Then she told me a little bit of her story. She works at a large grocery chain. She is married and has one little boy who has special needs. She wants to work and get ahead and provide for her son, just like any of us would for our child. She is unable to get healthcare through her employer until she has been there for a year. Even after she qualifies, she said it will probably be too expensive for her family. She asked me about the exchanges and how to sign up. She said “I am healthy, but I need to be sure my son is covered after he turns one.” There is coverage available for him, but the rules change at different ages. I did not know that.

What really touched me in our conversation was her attitude. She was not angry. She was strong. She was articulate and better informed than many people I know. She appreciates America and wants to work and succeed within our current system. But she said that she wanted to join the protest at the airport because she had been homeless and so she knows how it is. She wanted to stand up for people who have a hard time making it. She was salty.

For each of us and for our community of faith, we need to pay attention to our saltiness. How do we use the law, religious and secular? What we call “law and order” is important so that our government can protect the innocent and the vulnerable. But if we focus on law and order and neglect what Jesus called “*the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith*” (23:23), then according to Jesus, we become “*blind guides*” (23:24).

The good news is that we can decide how we choose to live. We have the ultimate example in our Lord Jesus Christ and we have grace available to us from God to help us live salty lives. There are three things I would offer to you as practices to follow as we continue through this season after Epiphany and prepare for the holy season of Lent:

1. Shake things up in how you get your news. If you are in an “echo chamber” of people who agree with you, whether on social media or in the real world, be intentional in getting other sources for information. And when you shake things up, really listen in prayer and with an open heart. Think of the example of my conversation with the woman on MARTA.
2. Pray. In our tradition, we follow what is called the Daily Office. In it, we read through the Bible and use regular prayers and canticles like the Lord’s Prayer and the *Magnificat*. Take time to learn how to pray this way. Start on page 136 of the BCP to learn it for your private prayer. Come to Morning Prayer at 9:30 on Tuesday mornings in the chapel. Come to the church for Noonday prayer on Wednesdays at 12:00. If you pray regularly using Holy Scripture, the grace you receive will transform you and how you see the world. It can help you stay salty.
3. Do something. It almost doesn’t matter what. If we do not respond to prayer and God’s Word, it is the recipe for losing our saltiness. We become stale and diluted

and start to question what the purpose of our lives is. Whatever you do, do it to honor God and grow in love for God's people. I promise you that works.

Today is a good day. The Lord has blessed us and our congregation-- and our country-- in so many ways. Now God asks what we will do to share our blessings with others. I am excited to be part of what the Lord will do in and through us in the years to come. And as we live into our calling to share our blessings, remember-- stay salty. Amen.