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Epiphany 5, Year A
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Salt and Light

We are living in a time when many of us feel worn down by divisive and dehumanizing rhetoric and the cacophony of voices competing for our attention and allegiance. This has all left me asking the question what does it look like to live faithfully during times like these.

The first followers of Jesus were asking the same question. They too lived in deeply divided times. And in response to that division Jesus invited his followers to remember who they are. He called them salt and light.

Those who first heard Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount lived in first century Palestine during the height of Roman occupation. God's people were living under the oppressive weight of the Roman Empire. And the Jewish community was deeply divided about the most faithful way to respond.

Some like the Zealots believed the only faithful answer was to revolt and overthrow Rome by force. You might say they were a little too salty. Others like the Sadducees took a more collaborative approach. They took a can't beat 'em join 'em stance. If preserving stability meant sacrificing core values, then so be it at least there would be the illusion of peace. They lost their saltiness.

And then there were the Pharisees. They believed faithfulness meant withdrawing from the world. They doubled down on obedience to the law creating boundaries so fierce that Israel would not be contaminated by Rome. In the process they hid their light under a bushel basket.

They were all struggling to answer the same questions. How do we live as God's people in a divided and hostile world. Do we fight. Do we compromise. Do we withdraw.

Into this confusion Jesus preaches these famous words. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Notice that Jesus doesn't tell them which political faction to join up with. Instead, Jesus reminds them of their core identity as God's people an identity that goes beyond partisan politics. You are salt. You are light.

When you remember who you are and what you represent all the outside noise trying to distract you and pull you into chaos loses its power. In its place comes the peace that passes all understanding a quiet confidence that gives you the courage to be salt and light in an often dark and tasteless world.

So, what exactly does it mean that we are called salt and light. For starters a small amount of either makes a big difference. Just a little salt can bring out flavor in an otherwise ordinary dish. And just a little light can change the environment of an entire room.

Additionally, salt and light don't exist for their own sake. Salt doesn't call attention to itself. Salt brings out the goodness already present in the meal. Light doesn't shine so that we admire the lamp but so that we can see what is in the room. Salt and light point beyond themselves.

Jesus emphasizes this point when he says let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. In other words the goal of being salt and light is not that people will notice us.

Our lives as Christians are meant to point beyond ourselves and toward the good news of Christ the good news of the kingdom of heaven. When we forget the purpose of being salt and light we easily get caught up in our petty differences.

Instead of focusing on the way we ourselves are called to be salt and light we get distracted by how others are being salt and light. But there are different kinds of salt kosher salt sea salt Himalayan salt and they all do the same thing. There are different kinds of light soft white bright white daylight and they all help us see.

The point isn't that one is better than the other. The point is that they're not competing. They're working together collaborating. They're all meant to point beyond themselves.

And whether we realize it or not God is using all kinds of people in all kinds of ways to bear witness to his Son Jesus and his kingdom. Now that doesn't mean Jesus is endorsing every faction or saying every response is equally faithful.

Each Christian denomination has its gifts and its blind spots. I believe God calls each to a particular role. And instead of seeing the role of the other as a threat I pray we might see how God is orchestrating a great symphony of voices to proclaim the kingdom of heaven in Christ Jesus.

I've seen a glimpse of this recently. I just joined a small group of pastors who gather once a month pastors from different races traditions denominations and socioeconomic backgrounds.

There's nothing romantic about it. Each month we get to see what only God can do make us one in Christ.

Our only agenda is to be in intentional relationship with one another trusting that God's agenda will be revealed in time.

By calling his followers to be salt and light Jesus is calling his people back to an identity that does not erase difference but transcends earthly divisions. As Paul reminds us in the kingdom of heaven there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile slave and free male and female. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

Jesus goes on to talk about righteousness not because he wants us to become more religious but because he wants us to grow in relationship with God and with one another which is the true aim of religion.

When religion becomes about performance it fractures our relationships with God and with each other. When righteousness flows from who we know ourselves to be in Christ it draws us together in right relationship which is at its heart what righteousness means.

The difference between those two postures is the difference between pointing to ourselves and pointing to God between our imagined versions of the kingdom and the kingdom God reveals in the very flesh and blood of Jesus.

The psalmist gives us a simple definition of righteousness. The righteous are merciful and full of compassion. When righteousness stops making room for mercy it has stopped being righteousness at all.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that those who love their idea of community more than they love their neighbor will end up destroying community but those who love their neighbor create community.

If you had a dollar for every time I've mentioned that quote, we'd be all caught up on deferred maintenance around here. But I keep coming back to it because it names something we need to remember again and again.

The moment we fall in love with our vision of what the church should be we stop seeing the people God has actually placed right in front of us. More often than not God's agenda is revealed not through our strategies but through the people God has already given us to love.

Living faithfully in divided times doesn't begin with getting everything right but with remembering who we are.

Remembering that we are salt and light not to draw attention to ourselves but to point beyond ourselves. Remembering that all people are made in God's image.

Living faithfully means remembering that our actions flow out of our relationship with Christ not out of our need to be right. It means remembering that loving real people is more important than defending how we think the world should look.

The temptation in divided times is to point fingers at one another instead of pointing toward Christ. We are tempted to measure faithfulness by comparison and competition instead of mercy and compassion.

In divided times the church's witness depends not on getting everyone to agree but on becoming a people whose identity in Christ is secure enough to love to listen and to point beyond ourselves to him who died not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus never said the world would know us by how right we are but by our love for each other. When we remember who we are and live according to that love we live into who he is calling us to be salt and light. Amen.