

A 5 Epiphany 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev. David Rider
February 8, 2026

Matthew 5: 13-20

Have you ever lost your mojo?

Either now or sometime in the past, have you experienced a time when your soul goes flat, when your physical, mental or spiritual vitality seems to fade?

The mystics often called this reality the dark night of the soul

The Victorians labeled it melancholia

Today's clinicians diagnose depression or anxiety

Whether episodic or chronic, whether in our own lives or someone we love, lost mojo can suck the spirit out of our souls while it challenges us to dig deeper and find new ways to connect with ourselves, our community and the world around us

Last year, I spent 5 days/nights aboard a massive towboat pushing 15 ginormous barges up the MS and Illinois Rivers

I did this many times when I served as Director of the Seamen's Church Institute, which ministers to inland river towboaters

This time, I was photographing towboaters night and day as they did incredibly physical labor to make and break their tows

Photographically, it's an awesome gig with very dynamic action shots and portraits

As a priest—and my life jacket says “chaplain” on the back—I quickly got into one-off conversations during the lulls in action

Because of their backgrounds and unique rhythms of working 28 days on a boat with 14 days of rest at home, the rapid deployment cycles, loneliness and family stressors while away at work qualify each of them to moonlight writing Country & Western lyrics while more ominously embodying higher rates of suicide

Tobacco addiction, marriage breakups, kids in trouble, and rural guns in the wrong hands fill their stories

Closer to home on Cape Cod, you and I have our own experiences of life's ups and downs

Sometime, we try to look past our daily struggles and earnestly put our nose to life's grindstone to get through the day

At other times, we want to unburden our souls to anyone who will listen

Whether life completely unravels or whether we stay within the safe confines of the worried well, each of us has our own story that we bring to life and prayer

When we are honest, we realize that trying harder or earnest striving to make it better rarely moves us forward

In this space, the last thing we want to hear is some chirpy eager-beaver with a whistle telling us to shape up and be happy

Enter today's Gospel lesson that immediately follows last week's beatitudes and continues Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

Removing any doubt that Jesus at one time was an English major, he hurls five metaphors at the crowd with rapid fire

Salt of the earth. Light of the world. A city on a hill (think New England Puritans). A lamp under a bushel basket. Give light to all in the house.

Once we are swirling in these metaphors, Jesus delivers his punchline: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

That's all before lunch.

If we were off on a weekend spiritual retreat together, we might do well to break into small groups, each taking on one of these five metaphors while sharing how it speaks—or fails to speak—to our own journey

Salt of the earth, light of the world and city on a hill are wonderful and well-known biblical metaphors, and I invite you to discern which speaks most directly to you

Right now, however, I suggest we embrace the metaphors but take a step back and wonder what message Jesus is trying to send

Together, they actually tee up a centuries-long existential conundrum, depending on your take regarding grace and rigorism, one that fueled the Protestant Reformation and its related civil wars

Briefly, let's remember both approaches, starting with rigorism (or works righteousness, in Reformation speak)

An enduring strand of spiritual DNA permeates Christianity from its earliest days

The word 'asceticism' (as in the ascetical life) comes from the Greek Olympic tradition and warns that you will never win the Gold by flitting through your exercises or by distraction with frivolous pursuit

Only the spiritual elite with incredible dedication to prayer and virtue will stand the test of time—lesser mortals are riffraff who will never make it to heaven

In this frame, Jesus's first words today depict him as the athletic trainer from hell, the drill sergeant who flogs the troops to be zesty, virtuous and the light of the world

Leap tall buildings in Jesus's name, perhaps a recipe for some accomplishment and probably much exhaustion

The other spiritual approach—embraced by giants like Augustine and Luther—says that we bring little to the existential party, must acknowledge our sinful wretchedness, but we get a huge boost by tapping God's healing grace and forgiveness that flows into our lives

Although I could use saltier language, this approach posits that I am a jerk except for God's merciful grace permeating my soul

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see

This approach has a pessimistic view of our human condition outside of God's grace, but it celebrates the Spirit's fire that adds fuel to our mojo, transforms us to see beyond our own noses, and serve as God's conduit of grace in a troubled world

What goes for an individual soul also speaks to a worshipping congregation

I envision Saint Barnabas's Church as a School of Love where we commit to a lifelong journey of spiritual curiosity, support and renewal

Week after week, we marinate our souls in prayer, worship, music and fellowship as we navigate the vicissitudes of daily life

Whether you view God's hand through the lens of rigorous spiritual exercise or gracious acceptance of divine mercy, let's acknowledge that both approaches bring both insight and limitation

On our best days as Anglicans, we find creative middle ground

Either way, we pray that mutual love and divine presence get us through our most challenging days while an upbeat spirit can bring levity and acceptance

However we get there and with whatever caveats, both individually and as a parish family, I invite you to ponder and dream new ways of embracing Jesus's punchline from today's Sermon on the Mount

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."