

February 9, 2020
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

Background:

Last Sunday, February 2, we celebrated the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. The gospel told of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus coming to the temple to offer the appropriate sacrifice. The readings for that feast were read instead of the usual readings for 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time. The usual gospel for that 4th Sunday is Matthew 5:1-12, the familiar narrative of the Beatitudes. It should be noted that as Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount, he has taken the disciples away from the crowd that has been gathering because of Jesus' healing ministry. The Beatitudes are wisdom literature, not law. They draw on everyday experience and point to a deeper religious truth. The Beatitudes also highlight qualities by which Jesus will live, and are therefore the qualities of God. As statements that reflect on everyday life to point to how one should live life in relationship to God and one's neighbor, the Beatitudes lead easily into Jesus' teaching about light and salt that is the focus for this week's gospel.

Salt was not only used as a seasoning, but it was and is now essential for sustaining life. It was an important preservative, an agent in purifying food, and a catalyst in the community/family oven. Because of the scarcity of wood, camel or donkey dung was mixed with salt, shaped into patties, and dried. The dried patties were then placed on slabs of unrefined salt and used as fuel in ovens. The salt acted as a catalyst in burning the dung. Eventually the salt from the slab at the base of the oven was absorbed and all that remained was a block of minerals. These blocks were placed in mud roads and paths during the rainy season. Matthew's narrative uses both functions of the mineral block—the oven and the foot path—when Jesus says to the disciples 'you are salt for the "earth-ovens."' Because salt was such an essential part of daily life, it was natural that it would be incorporated into people's religious life also. Leviticus recorded that each cereal offering must be seasoned with salt. "Every cereal offering that you present to the Lord shall be seasoned with salt. Do not let the salt of the covenant of your God be lacking from your cereal offering. On every offering you shall offer salt." (Lev 2:13) The scriptures also indicate that salt became associated with the gift of wisdom. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to each one." (Col 4:5) Jesus used this rich symbol to instruct his disciples on how they were to be of service not to themselves, but to others.

The other rich symbol used in this text is that of light. The fact that salt is used for the fire in the clay ovens and would produce a light in the dark night serves as way of connecting the two images. In a world without artificial illumination in buildings and on streets, light could be seen from a great distance. Such lights were a welcome sight to travelers caught in the wilderness and in the darkness. In the typical one-room house, a lamp would be placed on a stand in the middle where it provided light for all in the house.

Reflection Questions:

1. Take some time and think about this: In how many ways is salt part of your life?
2. How would your diet differ if you were on a totally salt-free diet?
3. In how many ways would your life be changed if you and all those in the area around you lived without light, not just electric light but all forms of light?
4. Can you think of times when the presence of a single light makes a significant impact?
5. Can you think of times when Jesus' presence, actions, or words made a significant impact for the people in the gospel?

6. Can you think of times when Jesus was being advised to put his light under a basket?
7. If someone were to say to you that you were the light of their life, what do you think they would be saying to you?
8. How have people you know been a light in your life, or a bit of salt?
9. Can you talk know with God about the ways you have been a light for others, the people in your life who have been lights or salt for you, or your own desire/reluctance to be a light or salt in today's world?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for February 9, 2020, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thus says the Lord:

Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless;
clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own.
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed;
your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call for help, and the Lord will answer and say: Here I am!
If you remove oppression, false accusation and malicious speech;
if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted;
then light shall rise for you in the darkness,
and the gloom shall become for you like midday.

*The just man is a light in darkness to the upright; he is gracious and merciful and just.
Well for the man who is gracious and lends, who conducts his affairs with justice.
He shall never be moved; the just one shall be in everlasting remembrance.
An evil report he shall not fear; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
His heart is steadfast; he shall not fear. Lavishly he gives to the poor;
His justice shall endure forever; his horn shall be exalted in glory.*

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, proclaiming the mystery of God,
I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom.
For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling,
and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom,
but with a demonstration of Spirit and power,
so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth.
But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?
It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.
You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.
Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket;
it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house.
Just so, your light must shine before others,
that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

Excerpts from Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112:4-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; and Matthew 5:13-16