

Epiphany 5 Year A February 5 2023 Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth.”

Salt of the earth.

This is a phrase I heard a lot when I was growing up. I was born and raised in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Berks is about 50 miles as the crow flies North West of Philadelphia.

It is a very rural place, with a lot of farming and agriculture. Both of my parents re-married into Pennsylvania Dutch families. Both families have strong ties to farming – having several generations of working the land in their blood.

My wife's family also has its portion of Pennsylvania Dutch farmers. I have several in-laws who work the same dairy farms that have been in their family for decades.

So, spending so much time in the Pennsylvania Dutch culture and especially among farmers, I often heard the phrase “salt of the earth.”

“That is a real salt of the earth family,” I might hear someone say.

“That person, that’s the salt of the earth,” I might hear another say.

“Salt of the earth, that is what they are.”

Of course, this is all meant as a compliment. To say someone is “salt of the earth” is to say they are reliable. That they are a person of great worth. A person of strong character. To my ear, there seems to be a bit of implied stoicism to the compliment.

This is someone whom you can trust. Someone whom you want by your side when it really counts. A person of integrity and honor.

Now, I have to admit to you, I never quite understood this metaphor. It never really made sense to me. As a child, when I thought of salt, I did not think of anything all that special or all that spectacular.

I mean, as a kid, I liked salt on my French fries. I knew that I did not like seeing salt trucks during a snowstorm, because seeing them, meant I probably was not going to have as many snow days off from school as I would like.

But, if you study just a little bit of history, it becomes clear, how significant a simple substance like salt has been. We can easily take for granted, what people of the past took as precious.

There is evidence that Neolithic man was harvesting salt in 6,000 BC.

Salt was used as currency by many ancient civilizations, being traded pound for pound with gold.

The Romans paid their officers in salt – this is where we get the term salary from.

Wars have been fought over salt.

In recent history, when Gandhi wanted to protest the rule of the British Empire, he and some 100,000 Indians marched to the sea to gather their own salt and not pay a tax on it.

And we know today, that it is a necessary component of our biological life. Without it, our body simply does not function. Neurons and synapses do not fire.

In Jesus' time, in the context of a Jewish audience, salt was a powerful thing.

It was a commodity, literally worth its weight in gold. It was essential for the preservation of food and daily survival. Most importantly, it was needed for the daily offering and sacrifices Jews were required to make to God. Jewish writings refer to “salt covenants” and “salt of the covenant.”

Salt was seen as an essential part of, and symbol of, the covenant, the bond between humanity and God. Without it, a Jew could not complete their religious and spiritual obligations to The Lord.

From great earthly importance, to even greater divine significance, salt carried great power.

With all of this in mind, we see then what a meaningful statement it is when Jesus declares his followers are the “salt of the earth.”

They are one of the most precious compounds known.

They are essential for daily survival and life.

They are foundational in the covenant between heaven and earth.

When Jesus calls his followers the salt of the earth, he is essentially calling them the essence of life.

They, like salt, are essential in daily living.

They, like salt, are of immeasurable value.

They, like salt, are an indispensable part of God’s covenant with humanity.

They are the salt of the earth. They are the essence of life.

When a Christian engages in daily praise of God, in prayers of joy and thanksgiving, they are the essence of life.

When a Christian places the highest value not on earthly wealth, but on the protecting and honoring of the dignity of every human being, they are the essence of life.

When a Christian declares the truth of the risen Lord Christ, and the living body of Jesus among us, they are the essence of life.

The salt of the earth, the essence of life, is in living out the Gospel of Jesus proudly and boldly. Of taking the light of Christ and letting it shine brightly in all parts of our lives. By not hiding that light away.

For it is in the Gospel that we are made complete. It is in following Jesus that we are made whole. It is in serving our neighbors that we are made into something new. These things are where life's real meaning and truth are found.

It is in the undeniable truth that God's love and God's mercy for us are infinite that real wisdom lies.

By living out the mission of the Church, we not only taste the salt of the earth, but we also become the salt of the earth.

By living out the mission of the Church, we not only experience the full meaning of life, but we become a part of the essence of life.

And we have the great joy and privilege to share that salt, that essence, with the whole world.

So share. Share what you have discovered here. Share what Jesus Christ has meant for you. Share the awe and beauty of God.

And share an invitation with others. An invitation to come and see and partake in the salt, the essence of life Jesus offers. Amen.