St David’s Episcopal Church

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Epiphany 5A, February 5, 2023

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12] **Psalm 112:1-9, [10]**  1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16] Matthew 5:13-20

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Yesterday, Annie and Sharon and I spent the better part of the day at a meeting for the Church Building Collaboration Project, a nation-wide program joined by many denominations and churches, and, in our case, a joint initiative of the Diocese of Indianapolis and the Diocese of Northern Indiana.

People from 21 parishes across both dioceses met at Nativity Episcopal Church in the general vicinity of East 75th Street and Binford Avenue. This was a driving commitment for some, like Annie, and for people coming in from Mishawaka, near South Bend, LaPorte, and other northern towns and towns like New Harmony in the southern toe of the state. We three have had a couple of zoom sessions with the folks from Sacred Places, the trainers behind this initiative, and yesterday was our first “live” gathering with our cohort.

We’ll share more about this with an invitation from Annie, and even more as we go further, but a funny thing happened. After 21 little presentations by all the parishes present, we were tasked to catalogue OUR church’s assets. I cheerfully said we have the BEST people. Annie gave me a side eye, and said, “Kate, every one of these churches has just said they have the best people. We can’t ALL have the best people!”

Maybe it’s like describing your toddler grandchildren, all of whom are the smartest, the most beautiful … the BEST. So, I settled with St. David’s having people **enthusiastic** about ministry, about helping out others inside and outside of our doors. If I had been looking just a wee bit forward, I might have said St. David’s parishioners are the salt of the earth. I know Annie, ALL the churches…..

The salt of the earth is an ancient expression and one used today as well. Given that salting the earth can cause it to become barren, one must ask why being the salt of the earth is a good thing. Why would Jesus say that? And what’s the deal with salt losing its taste?

Given that this Gospel begins with the very next verse following the Beatitudes, and given that all the readings this morning are a User’s Manual for Christian life, it’s remarkable, really: take this home and read them again – let’s talk about what salt meant to Jesus and his listeners.

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 under foot,” (Matthew 5:13, NRSV).

In the days the disciples sat on the side of a hill listening to Jesus, their experience with salt was very different from ours. Salt from the Dead Sea was plentiful, but very impure. Salts were mixtures of sodium chloride, magnesium chloride, and potassium chloride, and gypsum. Sodium chloride, the salt we know, would dissolve more quickly than the others, and the resulting taste would be, well, disgusting. Kind of like licking your sidewalk when the ice and snow melt. You would see that white residue, but you wouldn’t put it into your cooking. And even that is purer than what was common in the Holy Land.

Salt is necessary to sustain our health. That was known even then. Purer salt was very expensive. It was so valued that Roman soldiers received part of their pay as a salt allowance, called a *salarium*. *Salarium* is the ancestor of our word “salary”. Our work is valued and salt is a reward. Salt matters as our efforts matter.

You may be interested to know that the first reference to salt in all of literature is in the Scriptures. In the sixth chapter of the Old Testament Book of Job, Job has many horrible burdens and many complaints, as you know. Here is one of the most basic: “Don’t people complain about unsalted food? Does anyone want the tasteless white of an egg? My appetite disappears when I look at it; I gag at the thought of eating it!” (Job 6:6, NLT). And Job had better salt than what one would strain from the Dead Sea.

So there is the idea of being Christians who bring zest and flavor to life, the zest of loving our neighbors and working toward justice with flair. Nobody likes an overly pious person, except, perhaps, the pious person who acknowledges himself or herself regularly. Nobody wants to hear a lecture from them or be pounded over the head with their fanatical words. We Episcopalians are so fearful of being judged as Jesus Nazis we tend to keep our mouths shut in dread. Give me someone alive and joyous, and I’ll follow them! As Liza Doolittle said, “Don’t talk of love, show me!”

Salt is important as a flavor enhancer just as we are important as faith enhancers, as people whose lives and joy **invite** others to be with us.

I often think of the ebullient faith of Presiding Bishop Curry. I’m sure he set the royal family on their ears as he preached from his heart and soul, exploding about love and the love of Christ. We don’t have that pulpit, nor do we need it, to keep his joyful being in our own hearts. So yes, we are faith enhancers, bringing zest to Christian life and sharing it freely with others.

But Jesus was on a hillside. Were sheep grazing nearby? Raising sheep and other animals were important industries at the time, and Jesus just may have meant “the salt of the earth” in the very, very basic and essential use of salt in agriculture. He

In the right amounts and in the right mixtures, salt does not leave soil barren, it enhances it, it acts like a grow light in making the soil richer and supporting growth of grass, in particular, much better. The grass grows, the sheep are fed. The sheep grow, they multiply. The people are fed.

“Feed my sheep”, Jesus told us. And start below the root, not just at the end of the process. To us, that can mean that we literally feed people. It can mean that we get under the problem, that we attack the **causes** of hunger and poverty; nurturing and reclaiming the soil itself for pollination, that we work toward policies of fair pay, fair work arrangements, affordable housing: the human dignity of every human being.

Salt. So simple. So complex. So essential to life. Being the salt of the earth, then, is being Christ in simple ways, in complex ways, in ways that are essential to our lives and those of others. It is creating a flourishing environment for love and justice. It is creating, nurturing, and living in the promised realm of Jesus **now**, making it so for ourselves, our community, and our descendants. It means sharing the inviting flavors of attraction and joy with zest. And with all the readings today, we’ve got this. We need not be the best. We need only be the salt of the earth.

*Thanks be to God.*