

Shake & Shine: Matthew 5:13-20

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Rev. Heather Carlson, St. John's Presbyterian Church

Who doesn't love a good dash of salt on food?

At Bible study this week we were talking about tempting foods, and when salty chips came up, there was immediate, enthusiastic agreement. You could almost hear the bags opening in our imaginations. Salt just does something. It wakes food up. It pulls out flavour that was already there but hiding.

Of course, as we get older—or at least wiser—we're often told to reduce our salt intake. And that leads to experimentation. Herbs. Spices. Lemon juice. Garlic. Things that help bring out flavour without overwhelming the dish. Salt, when used well, doesn't dominate. It enhances. It makes something good even better.

It's no accident that Jesus reaches for this everyday image when he says to his followers: "You are the salt of the earth." In the Hebrew Scriptures, salt is more than a seasoning. There's a phrase used to describe God's binding relationship with Israel: covenant of salt.

In the ancient world—long before refrigeration or canning—salt was a preservative. It kept food from rotting. It extended life. So when salt was used to describe God's covenant with his people, it emphasized endurance, faithfulness, and permanence.

And salt was a symbol of relationship. To share the salt was to eat together. The way we might speak of breaking bread together. To share life as companions.

This imagery was built right into Israel's worship. In the temple rituals, prior to offering, sacrifices were seasoned with salt - grain or animal. Every time worshippers saw it, they were reminded: this covenant lasts. God's commitment does not spoil or fade. We are a people drawn into life as companions with God and one another.

So when Jesus looks at a group of ordinary people—fishermen, laborers, the poor, the overlooked—and says, "You are salt," all of that history was behind his words.

He's saying You are the flavour. You are the means by which God holds decay at bay. You are companions of God and one another.

And notice something important: Jesus does not say, "Try to be salt." He says, "You **are** salt."

This is not a command to strive harder. It's a declaration of identity.

But Jesus immediately adds a warning: "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" That would have caught their attention. Salt in the ancient world wasn't always pure. It could be contaminated, diluted, rendered useless.

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright puts it like this:

“God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth, but Israel was behaving like everyone else with its power politics, its factional squabbles, its militant revolutions. How could God keep the world from going bad—the main function of salt in the ancient world—if Israel, his chosen ‘salt,’ had lost its distinctive taste?”

Now, it’s tempting to read that as a criticism of Israel. But I don’t think that’s Matthew’s point here. Matthew’s first readers weren’t powerful insiders. They were a minority facing persecution. They were told that following Jesus meant they were eroding the faith, undermining morality, and threatening social order.

And that context matters. Because just before Jesus says, “You are salt and light,” he says this: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad...”

Persecution has a way of making us want to shrink.
To get quiet.
To blend in.
To sand off the edges of our faith so we don’t stand out.

Jesus knows that. And he says, in effect: Don’t forget who you are. Persecution wants to make you feel small. Jesus calls you essential.

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” Light doesn’t argue with the darkness. It simply shows up—and the darkness changes.

Jesus encourages his followers not to lose heart, not to lose identity, not to compromise who they are just to be more comfortable or more convenient.

Let your light shine! N. T. Wright reminds us: “Being light isn’t just to show up evil, but to enable people who were blundering around in the dark to find their way.”

Light helps people see where they are, where they’re going, and what’s safe to step on next. Light is meant to be seen—not for its own glory, but so others can live. “In the same way,” Jesus says, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Notice: Not “give glory to you.” But to God. When Christians live lives shaped by Christ, people don’t just notice us. They notice God.

I remember years ago, getting a letter from a friend, that instead of signing off “Yours truly” or “Sincerely” they had inserted “Shake and Shine.” I puzzled over that a good long time before finally asking. We are salt and light - so let’s shake and shine!

Shake—bring flavour, preservation, and hope into a world that experiences decay
Shine—so that those stumbling in the dark can find their way home.

God has placed each of us—in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities—for a reason. You are inheritors of the covenant. Chosen to be God’s people. Blessed to be a blessing.

A lot of us are struggling with how we do that. Now. Today. In 2026. We can see darkness and decay. How does Christ call us to shake and shine? To be salt and light?

Faced with weighty questions, this week many elders have been studying the PCC 1954 DECLARATION OF FAITH CONCERNING CHURCH AND NATION. Written to respond to WWII and then the Cold War, it is guidance for the church's political engagement in a time of crisis. Left copies on the tables at coffee, you are welcome to take one home, or read some together for conversation.

We reject all doctrines which assume....that the Church's life should be or can be completely dissociated from the life of the Civil State.

Responsibility to work for the remedy of any unjust statute, or [morally wrong] assessment, or violation of conscience.

It is the Church's duty to denounce and resist every form of tyranny, political, economic, or ecclesiastical.

If involved in [opposition to civil authorities], the Church must remember that the weapons of her warfare are finally out of this world. Led by the Holy Spirit she will in any situation bear public witness to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ and to the freedom of all [people] in Him.

Shake and shine. Salt and light. Identity and purpose. Courage and faithfulness.

It means humble obedience, even when it costs something.

It means resisting the pressure to blend in when faithfulness calls us to stand out.

It means choosing what is truly good and pleasing to the Lord over what is merely convenient.

Because the world doesn't need more noise.

It needs salt that still tastes like salt.

And light that still looks like Jesus.