

Crystal
5th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Healing and Wholeness Sunday
February 9, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Matthew 5:13-16](#)
[Isaiah 58:3-4, 6-12](#)

Growing up, we moved around a lot – and as a child, every move meant that almost all of my toys and books were packed up. Like many kids left to use their imaginations, I became quite creative at what I considered a toy – broken nails from a nail gun might be spaceships, or sticks and rocks would transform in my mind to be cars or swords or whatever else I wanted them to be. At one point, when we were walking around a new-to-us house, I gasped out loud when I saw a mini-rainbow on the ground. This looked like something out of my imagination, but it clearly existed in reality – a splash of rainbow color, in the middle of the living room floor. When I pointed it out to my parents, they told me that it was the sun’s light, streaming through the window at just the right angle, to hit a glass crystal on the chandelier in the dining room, to break into the colors that spilled on the floor below. Dad proved it to me by wiggling the chandelier a little bit – and the rainbow pattern moved along with the light. You can bet that I used that bit of rainbow light as a part of my games for months down the line, anytime I saw it appear in the living room!

You see, the light that we see in the world – whether from the sun, or from a lamp – while it looks like it is white or yellow, is actually made up of lots of colors travelling together. In a vacuum, they travel indistinguishably from each other – but when the density around them changes, they are deflected from their path by differing amounts. It’s this deflection pattern that we call a rainbow – and, it turns out, you can learn a lot from these patterns.

For instance, different sources of light have different gaps in their spectrum. If you burn magnesium, and look through a spectrometer, you’ll see a different

pattern of lights than if you burn sulfur, or hydrogen, or anything else. Astronomers use this to tell what stuff distant stars are made of – when their light is refracted into a spectrum, the strength of the colors and the gaps between them help identify what elements are present, and thus, what type of star it is. Our sun, for instance, burns brightly by fusing hydrogen into helium – and while helium is fairly common to find today, before pockets of helium were found in Texas, one of the only places it could be found was the Sun. That’s why it was given the name “helium” – after the Greek word Helios, for Sun.

While the details of how light splits through crystal prisms were first written down by Newton, and the atomic makeup of stars was far into their future, the ancient world certainly had a basic understanding that light bent when travelling through other stuff. Spearfishing, especially, depends on this knowledge – you don’t stab at where the fish appears to be, but at where the fish actually is, based on the bending of light through the water. Folks who spent time on the water also noticed that certain crystals would form when sea water was left in pools to evaporate – semi-transparent salt crystals, which could be almost a full rainbow of color in their own right, depending on what else was mixed in with them. And these crystals – as well as semi-precious stones loosed from their stony prison – would glow with an inner light when held before a strong light source. Salt and light.

Given Jesus’ strong association with fisherfolk – at least four of his disciples originally made their living by fishing – both salt and light would be familiar images with his followers. Because of the incredible saltiness of the dead sea, Israel was filled with salt crystals large and small – and in the ancient world, salt was precious and valuable. While we think very little of salt, to the Romans, it was often used in place of gold – to the point that many Romans were paid in salt crystals as their medium of exchange, the origin of our word “salary.”

Salt, you see, was not just used to preserve meat and fish, like we do today – but, when used properly, it worked as a fertilizer for the fields. Most salt, produced from seas around the world, is about 80% sodium-chloride, or table salt as we call it. But salt from the Dead Sea is only about 30% sodium-chloride – the rest is made up

of compounds containing potassium, magnesium, and calcium, three very essential parts of modern fertilizer.

When Dead Sea salt was spread on fields, especially when combined with nitrogen-rich organic fertilizers from animals, it helped the fields grow bigger vegetables and have fewer weeds. Salt was not just about flavor, not just about preserving – it also was known to make things flourish and grow big and strong. When Jesus says, “you are the salt of the earth,” a valid understanding is “you are the salt of the *soil*.” – you help things grow, just like salt does!

Yet, he uses these images not as a future-tense, “one day you will be salt and light” but in the already-accomplished sense of, “you ARE the salt... you ARE the light.” You already glow with the light of God, like a hilltop beacon to God’s love. You already are a preserving, nurturing presence, the salt of the Spirit, poured out on the earth to bring growth and healing.

Then, Jesus pulls an Aramaic pun. He says, “If the salt has lost its taste, how could saltiness be restored?” The Greek of this line is confusing – it literally reads, “if the salt has become foolish, how can it salt?” But in Aramaic, *tabel* is one word for salt, and *tapel* means foolish.¹ “If the salt becomes silly, is it salt?” might be a dynamic translation of this pun that sort-of works in English.

Similarly, there’s a bit of extra meaning when Jesus tells his followers, “You are the light of the world.” The word Matthew uses for world is *kosmos*, which means the natural order of the world, rather than the soil. It has a shade of meaning beautiful – everything in order, well cared for.²

You are the beautiful light of order. You are the nurturing, healing salt. If you stop being what you are made to be, you stop living into what God has called you to be. If your spectrum were analyzed, would it match your words? Are you indeed shining with the light of God, the light of order? Or have you fallen prey to the common trouble of light and salt both – that if a LITTLE is good, then a LOT

¹ Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Smyth & Helwys Commentaries) p.124

² Origin of both Cosmos and Cosmetics! (<https://somuchbible.com/word-studies/annotated-scripture/matthew-513-20/>)

must be amazing?!

Remember who the audience is that Jesus is addressing – the oppressed people in Galilee, who must be feeling down-trodden. To them, Jesus is saying, you are already enough. God sees the good you do, even in oppression. But when the people take things too far, it goes... poorly. As Debie Thomas points out, “Salt *fails* when it dominates. Instead of eliciting goodness, it destroys the rich potential all around it... This is not what Jesus ever intended when he called us the salt of the earth. Our preciousness was never meant to make us proud and self-righteous – it was meant to humble and awe us.”

This tendency of humanity, to go too far, to not realize what we’re called to do – it’s nothing new, but it stings all the worse for it. The book of Isaiah warns against a self-righteous showing of piety without helping others. The people, recently returned to their home after generations of exile, are complaining, “Why do we fast but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” God responds to these complaints: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.... Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?” It’s not in public showing of piety, but through doing God’s work in the world that healing and restoration come. “If you offer your food to the hungry,” Isaiah continues, “and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” By helping each other, you shine with the light of God, and God’s presence will be with you. Healing comes when we care for each other – in community, we are guided by God – nourished and healed by the waters we share with each other.

So, I pray that we would be filled with the light of God. Like a crystal of salt, may we glow brightly but gently. When we gather in community, may we refract God’s light into a whole spectrum, being the rainbow of Christ, each healing and filling the spaces in the spectrum left by each other. And let us not use power and piety to score points – but to genuinely humble ourselves and help each other in times of need. Amen.