

Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 8, 2026

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I'm going to go on record as saying that whatever work AI is doing, it's not the work of imagination. I say this without a lot of understanding of artificial intelligence or even our own neurology, but I do think there is some inherent connection between creatures with hearts and minds and the ability to imagine - and I don't think machines have it. Art and music and stories and so much more come from some place inside a body that we can't quite see on a CAT-scan, but that resides within each of us, in the same way that a soul rests here in each of us. For me, being created in God's image has something to do with our capacity to imagine.

I believe in this divine nature of imagination, even though I can't quite explain it, because one of the most striking qualities of Jesus is that he was incredibly imaginative. And Jesus is the closest we get to witnessing how God inhabits humanity. Jesus spoke almost exclusively in parables and metaphors. He described the world not simply with a recitation of data, but instead spun out stories and spoke in riddles and analogies. For goodness' sake, he saw the kingdom of heaven all over this earthly realm; if that's not imaginative, I don't know what is. And this gift of imagination is actually a kind of power in the world. Imagining things, seeing the world with eyes of possibility, opening the mind to make connections is potent. It's what fuels all kinds of abilities that we need not just to survive, but to thrive, among them idealism, relationships, hope, empathy. All of this requires imagination.

Perhaps it's easier to see how significant the ability to imagine is by considering what a lack of imagination looks like. Living without creative or generative thought is its own kind of poverty. If we can't see the world from someone else's perspective, we will be hard-pressed to care for them, much less to love them. If we can't surprise ourselves and each other with new ideas and connections, we'll quickly tire and bore ourselves and each other. If we can't wonder about alternatives and different paths, we'll just keep plodding along in the same ruts. C.S. Lewis puts the stakes even higher. For Lewis, it's ultimately about good and evil. He said, "Evil has every advantage but one - it has an inferior imagination ... evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself." For Lewis, evil is so self-interested and narrowly focused that it can't look up and around anymore; it's like a closed loop. The possibility of curiosity or empathy atrophies quickly. And evil then can't even recognize or comprehend the simple actions of goodness; evil, with its inferior imagination, is flummoxed by care and sacrifice, neighborliness and altruism.

But what does all of this have to do with Part Two of Jesus' most famous sermon? He launched in with an upside-down list of blessings in Part One that we read last week: the beatitudes, that innovative and imaginative way of seeing the world in entirely unexpected ways. And this week, he continues. Jesus looks out at a crowd that was described a few verses earlier in Matthew as containing his disciples, sure, but also the sick, those afflicted with demons, those in pain, those who are paralyzed, all kinds of strugglers, these confused and confounded crowds; he looks at *them* and sees *salt and light*. We already know Jesus can conceive of a world beyond what anyone else has considered, with all his kingdom of heaven here on earth talk. And here we learn that he can look at us and see much more than we can imagine about ourselves. You are salt. You are light. He

looks at a gathering of misfits and outcasts and curious bystanders and understands that these are the very people who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Through his capacious imagination, Jesus speaks a new way of seeing ourselves and the world into being. Because telling them, and telling us, that we are salt and light means that they, and we, begin to see ourselves in new ways and to see our role in the world in a new manner.

And so, then, it's worth considering for a moment what this might mean - specifically, to be salt and light. To be salt in the world is to be flavor in a sense, but what salt really does is amplify and deepen other flavors. Salt pulls out or reveals what might have been otherwise hidden or unnoticed. Salt isn't really for its own sake; rarely, if ever, do we just eat salt; rather, it's for making everything else better. Same with light. We don't turn on a light to stare at it; we light a lamp to see colors or faces, to reveal the room around us, or show the road ahead. Light also uncovers what might have been hidden or unnoticed. Another quality that both light and salt share is that they're both hard to put boundaries around. You can't salt half a pot of soup. Once you take a light out from under the bushel basket, you can't keep it from shining all over the house. Neither salt nor light is easily cordoned off or hoarded; really, they have no meaning if they're kept in a cabinet or never turned on. They're both - light and salt - for sharing and spreading. By their nature, if you're going to use light or salt at all, you can't keep it all to yourself.

Which means Jesus isn't imagining us misfits into private paragons of virtue for our own sakes. When he sees us, he sees us as belonging to the world around us, as being *for* others, shining for others, flavoring the earth, spreading out into the kingdom. This kind of imagination redoubles itself. Jesus sees a broken lot of stragglers and changes them, and then they become the very source of kingdom change. We are seen in new, unexpected ways, and we then blend and shape the world in new, unexpected ways. We are not called by Jesus to turn inward, not to be preoccupied with our own status, even with our own spirituality. To be salt, to be light is to undo the focus on our personal well-being. We're not operating on a narcissistic, closed circuit. Jesus imagines us as for others, as for the kingdom. You can immediately feel how this call runs up against narrow self-interest, against bigotry and bias. Even against evil itself. This kingdom imagination is an important check on the strong pull of individualism; it's a check against the tendency toward isolation.

Imagination is at the heart of caring for others. Empathy is an imaginative act. But we have to start by imagining ourselves as more than a bunch of broken-hearted, or just plain broken people. Can we imagine that we are salt? That we are capable of shining? And when we do that, can we imagine that we are salt for others or light for others? Believe this. This is how we will come to see the invisible connections between us as clearly as we see the face across the room. And the best news is that this is a powerful antidote to overwhelm, to loneliness, even to despair. Because we finally understand that we do have something to offer that matters - not just to ourselves but to others, and even a little salt or a small flame is enough to change the kingdom.

One more thing that C.S. Lewis said, "We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves . . . We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own." When we imagine ourselves the way God imagines us: as salt and light, we understand that we are more than we thought we were because we are *for more* than we could have ever imagined. We are enlarged, we are more than ourselves. We see more and imagine more and feel more. We matter to the kingdom. Our lives, as it turns out, are for the very kingdom of heaven right here on earth. Imagine that.