

Salt



Matthew 15:13-20

Year A Epiphany 5

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2
■	Jesus	▲	■
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	●	▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲	▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	▲

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter

{Jesus, in a very teacherly mood, speaks with the disciples.}

Jesus You're going to be the light of the world, and if you have a lamp, you don't hide it under a basket. You let it shine! Now who can tell me what a lamp is good for?

John Finding your way in the dark.

Jesus Very good. You'll be guides to those who are lost. What else?

Peter Well, sometimes when I have to do some close work, like undoing a stubborn knot, I set an extra lamp on the table.

- Jesus** Excellent. You'll help others to see things more clearly, to untangle their knotty problems. Anybody else? *[a pause]* How about you, Joanna?
- Joanna** Me? But I'm - *[trails off, too timid to say it out loud]*
- John** *[gently after a pause]* New here? A woman? We don't make those distinctions here.
- Joanna** *[meekly]* Well, okay...I don't know if this is a real answer, but the light coming in through my window used to help me wake up. You know how sometimes when you're really groggy in the morning, and just opening your eyes and letting the light flow into your brain helps to rouse it?
- James** *[critically]* That's the sun. We're talking about lamps! And dragging yourself out of bed in the morning is not exactly an earth shaking achievement.
- Jesus** *[mildly]* There are all kinds of lights, and it's a good answer. You will wake a sleeping world! Now, would anyone like to share any examples of a time you were a light to the world?
- {Nobody wants to answer at first.}*
- Peter** Well, I like to think I was a light to my boys. I tried to train them up right, show them how to get on in life. And they're good boys.
- Jesus** *[solemnly]* For the rest of their lives, others will see your light reflected in their faces. *[to everybody]* Who else?
- John** Mary was a light to all of us, the way she followed you and wouldn't take no for an answer.
- James** Big deal! Every one of us made a decision to follow, and most of us gave up a lot more to do it.
- Jesus** *[solemnly]* The deeper the darkness, the brighter the light shines once it's kindled. *[to everybody]* Who else? *[a long pause while no one else answers]* Joanna, how have you been a light to the world?
- Joanna** *[meekly]* Me? *[thinking]* Well, I suppose those gatherings I used to organize did some good. That's how I met you, after all! But I thought all our speakers were good. We were giving our guests a chance to hear new ideas, shedding light on the world, as it were.

Judas *[not unkindly]* I'm sure your intentions were good, but aside from the rabbi, how many of your speakers really challenged the world views of your guests in a radical way? You were the rich and the powerful, and I imagine that these speakers of yours served only to foster the illusion that you were doing something with your lives, that you were "growing". But at the end of the day, you'd just go back to your opulent homes, and the status quo, the crushing oppression of the other 99% of our people would not have changed.

Peter *[rising to Joanna's defense]* Dude, chill!

James *[more emotionally than Judas]* But he's right! What did she ever do for our cause?

John James!

Joanna *[meekly]* No, he's right. I suppose we never did do much material good.

Jesus *[firmly]* Every bit of light does *some* good, and the Light illuminates every man - *[correcting himself]* every *mind* that comes into the world. *[after a pause, in a lighter tone]* Anybody else?

James *[proudly]* Judas and I told off a scribe and a Pharisee the other day.

Jesus *[neutrally]* Did you?

James Yup. And there was a crowd there, too, to see it all.

John *[a little worried]* What did you tell them off about?

Judas Don't worry, it was justified. They attacked us first!

Peter *[militantly]* Someone tried to pick a fight with you?

James Well, not a *fight* fight, but they criticized the rabbi!

Jesus Really?

Judas More or less. They were getting on our case for not obeying some obscure law or other, and at one point, one of them said that you should have taught us better.

Peter If I'd been there, I would have punched him out for saying that!

James Believe me, I was tempted to. But instead, I just told him he was a hypocrite and a deceiver of the people, and that when we came into power, both of them would be out of a job.

John *[concerned]* Had they been, you know, hostile about what they said, or did they seem sincere?

Judas Does it matter?

Jesus *[gently]* It doesn't. Whatever their attitudes, you should have been more respectful.

James Us? But, but...But they're all hypocrites, aren't they?

Jesus Some may be, but by and large, these are men devoted to the study of the Law and its translation into the everyday life of the people. There is no higher calling.

Judas But they weren't really talking about the capital 'L' Law as in the Ten Commandments. It was some obscure little regulation that probably got added to the books by meddlers over the centuries. That's different, isn't it?

Jesus You may have heard it said that I came to abolish the law, but I'll tell you this now: I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it! And not just the ten commandments, but all the of the law, down to the last letter, down to the last dot on the last 'i'. Therefore, whoever breaks the least of these laws, or teaches others to break them, will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches them will be called great.

Peter Does that mean the scribes and Pharisees are going to make it into the kingdom? And they'll be the greatest?

Jesus Now I'll tell you another mystery: Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter the Kingdom!

Scene 2

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter

{Later that day, the same group approaches Jesus.}

Jesus I sense you want to talk some more.

Judas Yeah, we have some questions about what you said earlier today.

Jesus I'll be happy to answer them.

James Good. What we want to know -

Jesus *[interrupting him]* Actually, let's start with Joanna's question.

Joanna My question?

James She doesn't know what our question is!

Jesus She probably doesn't, but I hope she knows what *her* question is. You did say that you all had questions, didn't you? *[to Joanna]* Do you?

Joanna I suppose I do, but I wasn't even planning to ask it. And they seem more urgent about theirs. They can go first.

Jesus Nonsense! As John said earlier, we make no distinctions here. Isn't that right, men?

Peter Absolutely!

Jesus *[to Joanna]* Please.

Joanna Well, all right. It's something that occurred to me when you were talking about the smallest laws being just as valid as the big ones. But the thing is, a lot of the law is not the laws themselves, but our elaborations of them. For example, we're supposed to rest on the Sabbath, and that's fine and good, but what exactly does it mean? It's obvious we can't harvest a field, but can we pluck a pea pod? It's obvious we can't move furniture, but can we pick up a dropped plate? It's obvious we can't cook a meal, but can we sprinkle some sugar over our fruit? We have to answer these questions, but the answers get so detailed and arbitrary that they make the laws feel unreal, like a game people just made up. They can't be part of the Law as well, can they?

Jesus *[after a pause]* Peter, tell me what being a fisherman is all about. Tell me everything about it that I'd need to know to do it myself.

Peter *[at a loss]* Everything?

Jesus Everything.

Peter I'm sorry, but I wouldn't even know where to start. Maybe John or James could.

James Rabbi, it takes years to learn how to do it right and do it well. We can't just tell you everything in one afternoon!

Jesus When you were children, did you ever play at being fishermen?

Peter All the time!

Jesus Okay, in that case, describe to me everything about I'd need to know to play fisherman like you did.

Peter Well, that's a different matter! All you need is an old rowboat grounded in your backyard, a bit of worn out fishing net, and a tattered cloak. Then you just stand up in the boat casting your net and hauling in the fish!

Jesus Now *that* paints me a picture I can see all at once! And it sounds so easy. Could I catch real fish that way?

Peter *[good naturedly]* Now you're just jerking our chains!

John *[realizing where Jesus is going with this and playing along]* No, catching fish in the real world is a lot harder.

James For one thing, just keeping a boat seaworthy and afloat is no job for a child!

Peter And handling your net is a job for at least two men. Otherwise, it could end up catching nothing, or you could even lose it.

Jesus Suppose someone gave me a ride on his boat, so I don't have to worry about that, and helped me with the net. Then it's simple, right? Just cast the net and haul it in.

James No, no! You've also got to find a good spot where there are fish.

Jesus Well, just show me the spot and I'm there.

John It changes all the time. At best, you can only guess, but there are

lots of ways to make your guess better. You have to learn how the seasons and the tides, and even the daily weather affects the various types of fish.

Jesus Okay, suppose I guess right, just by pure luck, and haul in a bunch of fish. Then I'm done, right? I'm a fisherman!

Peter Dude, your troubles are only beginning! You've got to sell them, too, right? And that's not easy.

James We spent years developing contacts among merchants, and learning their processes and figuring out how much to charge.

Peter The math alone is a nightmare!

John [*knowingly*] I suppose the lesson is that what's real is complicated.

Jesus Exactly. A child plays carpenter or fisher and imagines them to be simple worlds, but the adults who do them for real know better. There are a thousand subtleties to wood! And who can express the nature of the Sea and the Life that teems within it in a few simplistic precepts? No, the endless complications of the Law are far from evidence that it's all man made. Rather, they are the very sign that we've come up against something with a real and independent existence in the world, something with nooks and crannies and odd angles to be explored. *Of course* our findings are going to be complicated! And this is the sacred job of the men you insulted the other day.

Judas Well, I guess that brings us to *our* question.

James We didn't think we were wrong to stand up to those men.

Judas After all, they help to prop up the Roman rule. They help maintain a terrible status quo. Isn't it right to confront them? How else can we effect real change, except by opposing and defeating the forces of evil?

Jesus [*after a pause, back to his teacherly tone*] Not only will you be lights to the world, but salt.

Peter Salt?

Jesus What's salt good for? What does it do?

James It makes things taste better.

Jesus Right. In fact, just last night, I was thinking how wonderfully salty the lamb chops tasted. Didn't you all think so, too?

Peter *[good naturedly]* Hey, I was the cook last night!

John I didn't think anything was too salty. The whole meal was perfect.

Jesus And I agree. The lamb was actually wonderful. The point is that salt is a good thing that makes your food taste better, but only when used in moderation. What else does salt do?

Joanna It preserves.

Jesus Right. *[solemnly]* You will be the salt of the earth, enhancing and preserving, but never overthrowing, the nature of the things you're sprinkled on.

Judas Excuse me, but that seems - unsatisfactory. Is that all there's going to be to it? Just a little sprinkle here and a little sprinkle there, but no real radical change? Where's the risk? Where are the high hopes? Where are the *stakes*?

Jesus *[somberly]* Oh, there'll be stakes. Joanna, what are some good uses for salt that has lost its savor?

Joanna Well - there are none. You just have to throw it out.

Jesus *[ominously and with feeling]* Beware the stakes!

John Rabbi? That's what disturbed me about our talk earlier today. You said that if our righteousness didn't exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, we wouldn't get into the Kingdom. It seems so...harsh. How can anybody be saved?

Jesus The real world is not a child playing at fishing in his backyard. The real world is difficult and dangerous, and often unfair. A real fisherman can be killed in an instant: through carelessness, or miscalculation, or even through a chance wave that chooses that moment to sweep across his bow due to no fault of his own. The world is a perilous place: Let us go forth into it with gladness!

everybody [somberly] Amen.

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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