

SALT OF THE EARTH

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Matthew 5:13-20

Sebastião Salgado was born in 1944 in an interior province of Brazil. He is alive today at the age of 76. In fact, his birthday was yesterday. Salgado was born and raised on a cattle ranch. He went to college and earned a master's degree in economics at the University of São Paulo. In 1971, he earned a PhD in economics from the University of Paris. Following his education, Salgado went to work in London with the International Coffee Organization. His work there required that he make frequent trips to Africa to gather data from coffee growers and suppliers. At some point, his wife had purchased a camera for her work as an architect and Salgado started taking this camera with him to Africa to document his travel experiences. It turned out that he was quite good at photography and so he abandoned his career in economics and purchased professional photography equipment and became a photographer. He worked out of Paris for several news organizations, but his real passion was for documentary photography—series of photographs that tell a story. As such, Salgado became recognized as a social photographer concentrating on the plight of human populations, on workers, on refugees. For the next 40 years, Salgado traveled around the world many times visiting over 120 countries to take his photographs. His photos have been compiled into numerous books and have appeared in all major publications. Salgado himself has won many prestigious awards for his work. He was even named a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador.

But what sets Sebastião Salgado apart is not just his artistic eye, or the particular way he processes his film, what makes Salgado's work special is his patience. He would spend time with his subjects—weeks, months, even years getting to know the people, living with them, gaining their trust. And then taking portraits of them and recording their lives in ways that aren't cheap or sentimental, but instead display the courage and integrity of these people as they struggle in what were often bleak and hopeless situations. Salgado went to the people living at the very margins of society—and beyond—to document their lives.

The project that first caught the world's attention was Salgado's photos of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil. In 1979, a child had discovered a nugget of gold in a river near the village of Serra Pelada. This discovery precipitated a gold rush in which hundreds of thousands of men converged on the location and by hand excavated a monstrous pit in the earth. Salgado traveled to the site. Other photographers had been there before. But they had only stayed a short while—just long enough to capture wide shots of the great hole. They also shot their photos in color. Salgado shot exclusively in black and white. He also stayed there for four weeks climbing down into the pit several times a day. He got to know the men, he

knew their stories, he learned how they had become slaves to the promises of gold. The resulting photos are stark portraits of pain, despair, and pride—men covered in mud hoisting 100 pound sacks of dirt up tall, rickety ladders to be paid twenty cents plus the possibility of gold. He also captured the wide landscapes showing men by the thousands swarming the mine like ants. His photos forced Brazil to change the working conditions at this mine.

In 1984-85, the Sahel region of Africa suffered a drought of catastrophic magnitude. The drought exacerbated the wars already taking place in the region forcing millions of people to become refugees. Working with the medical relief organization Doctors Without Borders, Salgado traveled through the countries of Mali, Chad, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea. He exposed the horror of the famine—the starvation and suffering in the refugee camps. He photographed the living and the dead and those in-between. Through it all, however, his photos preserve the dignity of these people.

Salgado photographed the inhabitants of the Andes mountains, a lost tribe in the Amazon, the war in Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda, and much more. His photographs are beautiful and haunting. They force the viewer to grapple with the struggles that afflict so many people.

In 2014, a documentary film was released that featured Salgado and his work. The title of this film is **Salt of the Earth**. This title describes the people that Salgado spent his career documenting. They are the salt of the earth.

This phrase ‘salt of the earth’ is one we use to describe people that we consider to possess the finest attributes of humanity—goodness, honesty, decency, humility. They are the ones who don’t draw attention to themselves. To be called salt of the earth is a rare accolade.

This phrase ‘salt of the earth’ originates with our reading from the gospel according to Matthew. The phrase has been part of the English language since at least 1386 when it was used by Chaucer in his **Summoner’s Tales**. We find this phrase in Matthew as part of Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount. That sermon starts off with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes sound a lot like Jesus is talking about the people photographed by Salgado.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Immediately following the Beatitudes, Jesus informs the crowd, *You are the salt of the earth*. Jesus does not use the words in the same way that we use them today. Jesus seems to be talking to these people as disciples, saying to them, *You are the salt of the earth. But salt, if it loses its taste, what good is it? It is useless. It must be thrown out.*

Jesus then follows this with a second statement, *You are the light of the world*. He then adds that his listeners are like *a city built on a hill*. Such a city cannot be hidden. He returns to the light saying, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket. No, they put it on the lamp stand where it may give light to all in the house*. He concludes this section with these words, *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*.

Salt, light, city on a hill—the connection here is the conduct of those who would follow Jesus. They are called to act in a certain way—as salt, as light, as a city that should not be hidden.

The thing about salt and light is that they are not the thing. They enhance the thing. We use salt to enhance the flavors of food. Green beans are good; green beans with salt are better. French fries, collards, most anything tastes better with a pinch of salt. My favorite flavor of ice cream is just caramel, but salted caramel.

But salt itself is not the thing. If salt is so good, why don't we just eat salt?

Light is the same way. Light is not the thing. Light illumines so we can see the thing. The most beautiful arrangement of flowers is nothing without light to see it. Jesus instructs his followers to be salt, to be light. It is not about them, but how they embrace the thing. They are to be like a city on the hill—something to be seen by all. You are to be light. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bucket. That is ridiculous. No, they set it on a table where it can bring light to everyone. The followers of Jesus are to be a light that shines.

What does it mean to be light? As Jesus tells the crowd, our light is the good work performed in the name of God. When we bring glory to God, we are light. The salt of the earth are those who point the world toward God.

The documentary about Sebastião Salgado is called *Salt of the Earth* and it is stated in the film that humanity is this salt. And this is true. That is what Salgado documents. But in the life of Sebastião Salgado we also find a person who truly embodies the mission Jesus gives his followers—to be salt and light. Salgado's goal

as a photographer is to shine a light so that others may see. The photos he takes are not the thing; they point to the thing—the lives of people living at the margins. The photos are light.

I would like to say that Salgado is a devout, practicing Christian. He is not. He may be what the French philosopher Albert Camus termed “a saint without God.” Salgado has gone to places that I will never go. He has witnessed things that I will never see. Salgado is not the thing, but he points to the thing. His photos remind us that there is suffering in our world, there is hatred, there is death. But there is also beauty, and strength, and resilience, and dignity.

For me, as a person of faith, in these photos, among the humanity, I can also glimpse the presence of God.

And that is good news. Even in the most desperate of situations, God is there. That is God’s promise to us, that God will never abandon us. That is the message that Jesus calls us—his followers—to give to the world. We must be salt; we must be light. As a church, in your daily lives, our job is to be salt and light and through our works of compassion and love let the world know that God is always with us.

Amen.