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Some of the most impoverished people I have ever known don't consider themselves poor. I'm not talking about the "poor in spirit," but people who survive on the bare minimum and don't think of themselves as economically poor.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[Feb. 9, 2020](#)

Isaiah 58:7-10

Psalms 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-16

I'm picturing people I have met in Peru, El Salvador or the Romanian countryside. Sure, they know that there are rich people who have and hoard an obscene amount of everything. When some Salvadorans visited a U.S. sister-parish they wondered how many extended families reside in the mansions hiding behind the gates of some neighborhoods, but seeing excess didn't make them feel poor. If they have a decent roof over their heads, enough blankets to share on a cold night, and can add water to the soup if someone drops in at dinnertime, they feel that they are doing OK.

People like these assume that everybody ought to understand Isaiah's call to care for the oppressed, the homeless and the naked like they do. In their thinking, Isaiah is simply reminding us of how to act like human beings. For some of them, the prophet's hardest challenge hits when there is a family feud and Isaiah demands, "Do not turn your back on your own."

Today, Jesus calls us the salt of the earth. He also warns us that we can become so bland that our contribution ends up being about as appetizing as dirt: able to enhance nothing at all.

Then he warns us that we are like the light of a city on a hill: Whether we are salty or insipid, we cannot hide. Everything we do gives witness to our faith or lack thereof.

It all comes down to the question of whether we illuminate the world or are nothing more than light pollution. (The Oxford Dictionary defines light pollution as "brightening of the night sky caused by street lights and other man-made sources, which has a disruptive effect on natural cycles and inhibits the observation of stars and planets.") Yup, light pollution really happens. It's like salt gone bad — it inhibits nature's self-care and cuts off our ability to see the rest of the world.

Jesus' preaching here is vivid, but not very specific. He tells us, "Be tangy! Shine with good deeds!" The details come from Isaiah and Paul, who describe the attitudes and activities that create good light.

Paul got very pointed in his letter to the Corinthians. He loved them, and that's why he could get so angry with them.

Their core problem was factionalism. Some bragged of their sophistication; others claimed orthodoxy based on the missionary theologian (Paul or Apollos) they favored and followed. Paul put up with none of that. He reminded them that instead of impressing them with erudition, he had come among them like a bumpkin: in weakness, fear and trembling.

Then he reiterated the horrific, blunt truth that the Christ he preached had appeared as the poorest, most powerless person imaginable: a savior who revealed his dignity and strength on the cross.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to get back in touch with how the essence of his message had come alive among them. Paul saw how easy it was for them to slip into the values of a society that esteemed a person for learning or wealth, for status and fame. Paul wanted them to remember "the mystery," how they had experienced a love of God and community that had revealed the utter emptiness of those societal standards.

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How could they do that? Here's where Isaiah comes in. Isaiah says, "If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation, and malicious speech, if you bestow your bread upon the hungry ... then light shall rise for you."

Sometimes, it's a question of acting yourself into a new way of being. If you are getting caught up in the divisions of church and society, if the newest electronics are becoming a prime object of your attention, if achieving or maintaining status is fueling your ambition, be careful. You are a city on a hill. The tragic irony is that everybody can see through people whose self-worth depends on such things.

Isaiah suggests that we straighten ourselves out by altering the company we keep. Can you frequent a soup kitchen and listen to people whose experiences are unlike any you have ever had? What about allowing someone like St. Joseph Sr. [Helen Prejean](#) or Jesuit Fr. [Greg Boyle](#) to teach you? If you can't meet them in person, pick up their books and let them challenge your outlook.

Today, we're invited to become saltier. We'll do that by reconsidering our values and learning from people whose approach to life makes us question our own. With that, new light will dawn on us — and it will inevitably shine forth.

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