

Matthew 5:13-20
"Salt and Light"
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 9, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Our Gospel text this morning is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and comes right on the heels of the Beatitudes. Here, Jesus reveals the identity of everyone who follows Him. Here, Jesus speaks of His followers as salt and light.

[Salt of the Earth]

Jesus says to us: *"You are the salt of the earth"* (Matthew 5:13a).

So, what does this mean? What is Jesus saying?

Well, in the ancient world, salt was highly valued. In fact, back then the Greeks called salt "divine."

You see, salt was very important. Before we had refrigerators, freezers and Ziploc bags, salt was the only way to preserve food. Salt was very useful.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, salt was connected in people's minds with three special qualities.

First, salt was connected with purity. Much like fresh snow this time of year, salt's glistening whiteness makes us think of purity. The Romans then even said that salt was the purest of all things, because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea.

So, if the Christian is to be the salt of the earth, the Christian must be an example of purity. We are to be useful, just as salt is useful.

One of the characteristics of the world in which we live is the lowering of standards.

Standards of honesty, diligence in work and morality have all been lowered in society. The act of lying, being lazy and immoral lifestyles are praised by the world. So, what are we to do? Are we to lower our standards to be like the sinful world? No! The Christian is to hold the standard of absolute purity in thought, word and deed.

The second quality of salt was that it was a preservative. Salt was used to keep things from going bad, and slow decay.

You see, salt preserves the body. Salt preserves from corruption.

The sinful world only knows of sorrow and decay, so as the salt of the earth, we are to be the cleansing salt that turns the sorrow into joy and the decay into life as we speak of Christ's promises of eternal life, salvation and forgiveness of sins.

Third, the most obvious quality of salt is that salt lends flavor to things. Food without salt can become rather tasteless, really quick. Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Christianity lends flavor to life.

Now, in today's sinful world, the society has connected Christianity with precisely the opposite. The sinful world has connected Christianity with what takes the flavor out of life. The sinful world calls Christianity bland, old fashioned, and boring.

The reality is that in this worried world, the Christian remains serene. In a depressed world, the Christian remains full of joy. So, as the salt of the earth, the Christian is to be the giver of joy.

But right after Jesus says we are the salt of the earth, He warns us saying: ***“But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet”*** (Matthew 5:13b).

So, how could salt lose its taste? On its own, salt does not lose its flavor or saltiness. So, what is Jesus saying?

As Jesus was speaking, it was custom that ovens – which were all outdoors – be built of stone on a base of tiles. In order to retain the heat, a thick bed of salt was laid under the tiled floor. Then after a certain length of time, the salt perished. The tiles were then taken up and the salt thrown out. The salt was thrown out, because it lost its power to heat the tiles.

So, this salt has lost its taste and its saltiness. It is now worthless. So, how can this worthless salt restore its saltiness and be restored? It can't. It's thrown out.

Here, Jesus reminds us that if we are not fulfilling our purpose as a Christian, then we are rejecting His calling and become tasteless. We are meant to be salt of the earth. So, if we refuse His calling, we desert the Lord who called us and we are no longer the salt of the earth, so we will be “thrown out” and “trampled” on the Last Day. We will decay and be thrown out, just like the unbeliever.

As Christians, we are to be **pure**, we are to be a **preservative**, and we are to be full of **flavor**.

[The Light of the World]

Jesus continues saying: *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 5:14-16).

So, if you are feeling the Law by not being salty enough, now Jesus is commanding us to be lights of the world.

Jesus is demanding nothing less than we be like Himself.

You see, light casts out darkness. Now, darkness is associated with evil, with danger, with the condition of being lost and being unable to find your way. Jesus came to drive out darkness. In response, the powers of darkness sought to snuff out Jesus. On that Good Friday, it looked as if darkness overpowered the Light. His lifeless body was laid in a cold, dark tomb.

Three days later, Jesus threw open the door of the grave and death as He brought forth Light! So, since Jesus lives, we do not just believe differently than others, we live differently. As Christians, we are the world's light, for in Jesus, light has begun to shine.

The good news is that we are not on our own, because our light is in fact borrowed light. We shine with the reflection of the Light of Christ.

So, when Jesus says that the Christian must be the light of the world, what does He mean?

First, a light is something that is meant to be seen. Remember, the primary duty of light is so we can see. So, as a Christian, we are meant to be seen and our faith should be perfectly visible to all people.

Now, our Christian faith should not only be visible within these church walls. Our Christian faith is to be visible in all our vocations – the ordinary activities of our daily life: in the way we order a meal at a restaurant, in the way we respond to the grocery cashier, in what we read, in what we watch on the small screen and the big screen. A Christian is to be as much a Christian in the workplace, the classroom, and with family and friends as we are in church.

After all, Jesus did not say: You are the light of the church, no He said, “You are the light of the world.”

Second, light is a guide. Now, how well do you see at night when it is pitched black? How well do you see at night without a flashlight and car headlights? So, a light is something to make clear the way.

Likewise, Christians are to make the way clear to others. This is to say, that a Christian is to be an example. The unbelieving world needs guiding lights to lead them to Jesus, who is the true Light (John 1).

Third, a light can also serve as a warning. A light is often the warning that tells us to halt when there is danger ahead. Flares, stoplights, flashing lights and light houses serve as warnings to drivers and ships.

So, as Christians we are to warn fellow believers when we each act un-Christianlike. At the same time, we warn the unbeliever to repent and follow Jesus. As the light of the world, we are the light that is **seen**, we are the light that **guides**, and we are the light that **warns**.

[Christ Came to Fulfill the Law for Us]

Jesus, then tells us: ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”*** (Matthew 5:17-18).

Here, Jesus calls attention to His active obedience – the fact that He fulfilled God’s Law, every iota and dot of it, in our place. His compliance to God’s Law makes up for our failures and empowers our successes.

Jesus has not done away with the Old Testament Law. Instead, He has fulfilled it for us!

Sadly, some Christians believe that Christ has abolished the entirety of God’s Law. This is **not** the case! Only the Ceremonial Law has been completed, since Christ is the Great High Priest through His sacrificial death upon the cross and His bodily resurrection from the dead. We still have God’s Moral Law. As a disciple of Jesus, we desire to hold fast to what Jesus has revealed and commanded.

“Therefore who ever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19a).

So, disregard for God’s Word can lead to a loss of faith in Christ, and to a loss of salvation. Likewise, a person who “relaxes” God’s commands is failing to be “salt” and “light” in the world, and thus is failing to bring others to glorify the Father who is in heaven.

[God’s Way to Keep Salty and Full of Light]

So, how do we keep salty and keep our light shining when each of us is guilty of not obeying God’s commandments?

Well, not through heroic acts or feats of superhuman strength.

We keep salty and keep our light shining by following Jesus who fulfilled the Law *for us!*

As we receive God's Means of Grace in hearing His Word and receiving His very body and blood, we receive forgiveness and our faith is renewed. We become more salty. We become brighter.

The Triune God alone – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – strengthens us so our faith is tasted and seen.

Now, the disciples were often shy in reflecting their love for Jesus, and so are we. Most of us are afraid to talk about our Christian faith in public. Why? The Early Church did that and they did it in far more dangerous circumstances than today. The worst penalty in the Western world is a pat on the wrist. Now, other parts of the world experience do physical persecution. We act like we're there, but we're not.

If you will not say what you believe, at a certain point, you won't believe it.

So, why are we hesitant? Why are we often cowards? Remember, by grace through faith in Christ alone, we are immortal! Jesus is risen! He has destroyed the powers of the world, sin, death and hell! So, what are we really afraid of?

Praise be to God that He is patient and does not quickly discard us when we fail. He leads us to repent, to renounce the ways of sin and darkness, to be forgiven for the sake of the cross, and to strive anew to follow Him and live a godly Christian life.

I am reminded of British General Charles Gordon who tried to hire a Muslim as his servant. The man refused saying, "You will make me a Christian."

General Gordon then promised that he would never speak to him about religion. Still, this man refused and said: "By my daily association with you I would become a Christian without a word from you. Your conduct speaks plainer than words, and I wish to avoid it. I will not become a Christian."

General Gordon's Christian light shined brightly. The question for all of us is this: Do people outside our church doors know that you are a Christian? Or do you just blend in with the world?

The thing is: when we love as God loves, people will take notice. That may lead others to see a light of hope at the end of their tunnel of darkness. That light is Jesus, and we are happy to give Him all the credit! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠