

Salt and Light
February 5, 2023
Fifth in a Series of Seven, “A Season of Light”

Matthew 5: Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” 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.

Dear friends in Christ,

A Sunday School Superintendent named Mr. Daily tells a story of a girl named Judy who came to Sunday School one day against her will. When Mr. Riley told Judy that he was glad she had come to their Sunday School, she responded by kicking him hard in the shins. He thought to himself, “This is a fine way to begin our friendship.” He responded by being kind to her and teaching her about the love of Jesus for her. The next Sunday he greeted her with a friendly spirit, and she responded by kicking him hard in the shins, not once but twice. Mr. Riley had his doubts whether this would ever work well, but he decided to keep on being kind and inviting her to know the love of Jesus for her.

A few Sundays later, she sat next to him in church, Judy slid over to where he was sitting, and put her head on his shoulder. She looked up at him, and said, Mr. Dailey, I hate you! He said, “I know, I know.” He thought to himself, “Well this is better than getting kicked in the shins.” He kept on being kind and teaching her the love of Jesus.

As time went on, Judy kept on coming to Sunday School, thereby putting herself in a position for the light of God’s Word to be chasing away the darkness that was lurking in her heart.

Our sermon series in this Epiphany season is under the theme, “A Season of Light.” Previous sermons themes have included - Rising and Shining, Seeing and Pointing, Following and Fishing, and You Are Blessed. Next Sunday, Planting and Watering, and on Transfiguration Sunday - “Eyewitnesses.”

Today - Salt and Light. Two truths we would learn today about joining Jesus on His mission to spread the Gospel near and far. Truth #1 deals with the danger of losing our faith, which Jesus compares to salt losing its saltiness. And truth #2

deals with the danger of keeping good news of great joy to ourselves, which Jesus would compare to people lighting a lamp and then putting it under a bushel basket.

Two good Lutheran questions we would ask about what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. What does this mean? And how is this done?

Question #1: What does it mean to be the salt of the earth?

Our text today is part of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Christ is teaching His followers what the fruits of repentance taste like. What it looks like when the baptized and forgiven and precious and loved children of God are rising up morning after morning and shining their Gospel lights into every corner of their lives. What it looks like when redeemed sinners are following their Savior with a faith that will not be shaken and a joy that will not be kept down for long.

In Jesus' day, salt was a basic commodity that was impossible to live without. Before refrigeration, salt was the only way to preserve food from spoiling. It was also important for basic first aid to sterilize cuts and wounds. To pour salt on a wound in those days wasn't so much piling on and making a bad situation more unpleasant. Salt would bite and sting, even as it disinfected and purified.

When Jesus declares that his followers are the salt of the earth, He is counting on us to fight decay and corruption. We live in a society where people in increasingly larger percentages are falling away from the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for them. Drifting away from His Church where His gifts of grace and mercy are offered week after week.

George Barna research suggests that a majority of Americans / 57% believe that knowing what is right or wrong is a matter of personal experience. 74% of millennials agree with the statement that "Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know."

Of course, moral decay and bad attitudes and wrong behavior aren't just out there in society somewhere. They are here in our family circles, in our workplaces, and in our neighborhoods. The stain of sin is on our hearts. The messed up motives are in our minds. The crookedness is inside of our souls.

Before we can understand what it means for us to be the salt of the earth, we need to see Jesus as the original salt of the earth. When the people of Jesus' day kicked him in the shins, he did not retaliate. When they hurled insults at him, he did not hurl back. When they slapped and spit and savaged him, Jesus just stood there, he

just knelt there and he took it. He suffered all that we deserved to suffer, he was bruised and battered and beaten bloody and crucified until dead and buried. So that our sins could be forgiven. So that our sorry souls could be saved. So that our names could be written in the book of life, our mansions in paradise could be on reserve, and the eternal victory could be ours.

A theologian named Besser wrote some time ago that what the world would prefer is that we were honey instead of salt. More and more there is a desire for the hard truths of Christianity be sugar coated, watered down, waffled around, or as Besser would say coated with honey instead of preserved with salt.

Jesus says not that we should be the salt of the earth nor that we should try to be the salt of the earth, but that we are the salt of the earth. By definition, salt is salty, and in the same way, by definition, the new life that we have in Jesus Christ is alive with the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

The rhythm of Christianity is that God stoops down into our world with His love in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, we receive that love, we enjoy that love, we are glad about that love, and then we spend our days looking for neighbors who are hungry for something that is missing in their lives, and they're not even sure what. First of all God forgives our sins, we enjoy that forgiveness, we are glad about that forgiveness, and then we spend our days looking for neighbors who are feeling weak or weary or guilty or lost or all of the above.

How is this done?

The prophet Isaiah answered in our Old Testament lesson for today in terms of ***sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your house, and when you see the naked, cover him.***

One preacher answered it this way, *“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.”*

Luther answered in terms of living out our vocations in ways that are faithful and pleasing to God. At one point, he pointed to the changing of a dirty diaper as a holy act, because you are doing what God does -providing and protecting for this child.

Question #2: What does it mean to be the light of the world?

Truth #2 is that Christ is counting on Christians to be the light of the world, not shades of gray.

Again, before we can explore what it means for us to be the light of the world, we fix our eyes on Jesus, the original and the authentic light of the world. He is that great light that has shined in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. He shined forth as a baby in a manger, and as prophesied, Gentile kings were attracted from afar and worshiped Him with the best gifts they could offer. In His childhood, He was guided in perfect fashion by the Word of God which was a lamp unto his feet and a light unto his path. He was the light of the world in public ministry as he listened to and rubbed elbows with hurting and broken people. He was the light of the world as he led his disciples into the darkest corners of Galilee, as he set his face towards the cross and would be distracted, as he took upon his own shoulders all of the darkness and all of the sinfulness and all of the shamefulness of this world, and as you well know, he carried it to the cross where he cried out in the darkness to his Father, why have you forsaken me? Jesus, as you well know, is the light who rose up again on Easter Sunday, and because He is risen, all is well between God and us.

And because all is well between God and us in this sanctuary Sunday after Sunday, we worship, we receive, we find refuge, we commune, we are forgiven and renewed and refreshed, and then we scatter. We scatter as little lights in this world, making sure not to hide the Good News of forgiveness of sins, making sure not to keep to ourselves the peace that only Christ can give, wondering out loud and quietly how can we be letting our lights shine, so that others might see our good works and give praise to our Father in heaven.

How is this done?

My friend, Pastor Paul Muther preached on this text and in his conclusion emphasized the difference between living our vocations in ordinary ways, as opposed to being extraordinary. He urged God's people to "strive to be extraordinary husbands and wives. Strive to be remarkable neighbors and employees. Strive, in the thousand small tasks that make up almost every day, to be remarkable in a way that men would see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Dear friends in Christ, wonder with me today what it means to be a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. What does it mean to be living our faith in such a way

that others see Faith Lutheran as a place of refuge, as a place where their deepest needs are met and satisfied by God Himself.

We let our lights shine not so that we would be praised but that God would be praised. We do good works, we befriend our neighbors not so others say what good people we are but so that others would say how great God is. We are kind and patient and forgiving not to somehow obtain God's favor, but because he has already favored us.

The kingdom of God is like a grandma who speaks a hard truth to a beloved grandchild with tears in her eyes. It's like a man who sees his co-worker going down the wrong path in life and he gets down on his knees this week asking the Lord for courage and for wisdom as he looks for an opportunity to intervene. It's like a woman who walks alongside her friend going through valleys of deep depression and anxiety. It's like a teenager who has lunch with the classmate nobody else will have time for. It's like a congregation of believers who understands that Jesus has invited us to be living our faith in such a way that battered and beaten down and wounded and struggling folks of all ages and in every station of life are attracted to this sanctuary as a place of refuge, a proclamation of old-fashioned truth, and a beacon of hope.

These well-meaning Christians have their bad days, their ok days, and their good days. On their bad days, when they get kicked in the shins, they kick back. On their ok days, they grin and bear it. On their good days, they see it as an opportunity to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.