**Matthew 5:13-16** February 9, 2020

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*Matthew 5:13[Jesus said,] “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. 14You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Global Commodity Crisis: Salt and Light Shortages!!!**

**A:Who’s Jesus Talking to Anyway?**

“YOU!” Just as you absent-mindedly walk into the lunch room it gets shouted, “YOU!” A handful of people in the lunch room all turn around and look at you. What’s going on?

“YOU!” Jesus says. He doesn’t yell it, but he says it emphatically. It doesn’t really come across in our translations, but it is there in the original. There is an extra “You” both in verse 13 and 14, “you”s that don’t need to be there, but Jesus wanted them to be there. ***“*You, *you are the salt of the earth…* You, *you are the light of the world.”*** This isn’t a general guideline for the hypothetical Christian. Jesus points at you. “YOU!” Like you walking into that lunch room and somebody suddenly singles you out, our reading in Matthew 5 drops you right in front of Jesus and you are left to figure out why Jesus is raising his voice and looking you in the eye!

“But wait a minute,” you think. “Jesus isn’t talking to me. He is talking to a crowd of sandal-wearing toga-clad Jews gathered around him far away, long ago. Pastor, don’t lay your guilt trip on me!”

I beg to differ.

Last week, and this, and next, we have Gospel readings from a teaching session Jesus had. It has come to be called the Sermon on the Mount. In verse 13 our reading starts us well into Jesus’ sermon. It is like walking into the middle of a conversation. When Jesus says, “You!”, is he simply talking to toga-clad sandal-wearers? Is he pointing at people who would be completely lost in the technology of our day? We hope so, because then it lets us off the hook.

Who is he talking to? Let’s go back to the beginning of this event, this Sermon on the Mount. Verses one and two of this chapter: *“Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,and he began to teach them, saying…”* Jesus preached this sermon to his disciples. Not the curiosity seekers who had nothing better to do. Not the entertainment hungry who were hoping he would pull another one of those whizz-bang miracles out of his pockets. And in this sermon Jesus basically had almost nothing to say to unbelievers. Jesus is talking to his followers, believers.

If you are a Christian, if you look at Jesus as your Lord and Savior—and that is my assumption this morning about each of you—then Jesus is looking you in the eyes, he is pointing at you when he says, ***“*You *are the salt of the earth…* You *are the light of the world.”*** It’s not them, 2,000 years ago. It’s not the unbeliever out in his fishing boat on Sunday morning. You can’t say, “Later Jesus, when I retire.” Jesus says, “You! Here! Now! You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

**B. What’s He Mean by Salt and Ligh**t

When Jesus calls us Salt and Light, what exactly does that mean? How am I supposed to be salt, light?

We have been conditioned to think of salt as a bad thing. We are always hearing, “Americans have too much salt in their diet.” Through the ages human beings have usually had trouble getting enough salt. Like us, in Jesus’ day they used salt to flavor food and, in that time before refrigeration, for preserving food. One Roman philosopher from about the time of Jesus said, “Heaven knows, a civilized life is impossible without salt!” (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*). I’m not exactly sure what he meant, but apparently salt provided many of the necessities that took life from survivable to pleasant.

As to light, Jesus mentioned a lamp. Back then everyone used lamps. When I was a kid and I heard Jesus say, “Nobody puts a lamp under a bowl,” I always imagined those big kerosene hurricane lanterns with the wire handles, standing a foot or more tall. I always wondered how big a bowl you would need to hide one of those. And wouldn’t that be a fire hazard? The lamps Jesus talked about were very low to the ground (to prevent tipping), and at best maybe as bright as a small candle. But in an age before electricity, people valued their olive oil lamps, especially in the long nights of winter!

Now you know a little about salt and light in the ancient world. But how are we like salt and light? We can analyze and make all kinds of comparisons, but personally I think you end up missing the point when you do that. The more we try to explain precisely how we are like salt and light, the more it crumbles in our hands and we lose the point.

It is enough to say that salt and light are such blessings that without them life would be unpleasant, more difficult, even dangerous. Light and salt are such obvious goods that if you are going to make me explain just how they make life good, I am going to throw up my hands and say, “Never mind.”

So, too, the Christian. You and I should be obvious goods to the world around us.

**C. Salt and Light for Eternal Good**

Way back in the third century A.D., when Christians were still a persecuted minority, a massive plague ravaged the Roman Empire. Not like our Coronavirus. This was really serious. As many as 5,000 people a day were dying just in the city of Rome. At first, the Romans blamed the Christians. “Fewer people are worshipping the Roman gods because of you Christians. And now the gods are getting vengeance on us because of you,” so people said. As the plague raged, the pagans did what pagan cultures did: they abandoned those who fell sick and left their corpses unburied. Survival of the fittest, don’t you know! Meanwhile many of the Christians, especially the Christian clergy did the opposite. Instead of abandoning the sick, these Christians took to caring for the sick, comforting the dying, and burying the dead. No, God did not miraculously keep them safe. Many Christians served the sick at the cost of their own lives. Their actions were a turning point. People suddenly had a new take on Christians. After the plague, popular suspicions about the Christian minority began to disappear. (*https://www.str.org/blog/the-witness-of-christian-compassion#*) About a generation later the Christian faith not only became legal, but it became the faith of most of the Roman Emperors. (Never heard about this on the History Channel? There is a reason.)

Is that not a profound example of being light and salt? Is it not what Jesus said? ***“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*** Listen carefully to Jesus. Our good works as Christians can help the sick, comfort the dying, lift up the oppressed, feed the hungry. By God’s grace we do beautiful things. But Jesus wanted something even better to happen. What do I mean? There is a line, maybe you’ve heard it, “We’re all gonna die! ☹ But I have a helmet! ☺” The point is: If our help only helps for this life, it helps but only for the moment.

Jesus tells us to do good, to be salt and light, with a higher goal, like those third century Christians in the midst of that plague. They not only lessened human suffering, but they gave eternal help. And in the end the heathens learned to ***“Praise their Father in heaven.”***

God’s desire for us, the saved, the Christians, is to be full of good deeds, so full of good deeds that people look at us and say, “You know, those Christians—even though I don’t really see things the way they do—this world would be a worse place without them.” And once that grudging compliment is given, perhaps they will be led to the next step, to become curious and to listen about who our God is, and then perhaps to even call upon that God. That’s what happens with salty, light-bearing Christians.

But, oh, how far short we fall! Instead of constant divine light pouring from us, people see shortness of temper, bad-mouthing those around us, indifference to suffering, laughing along with or even cheering on the filth of this world (here I include Superbowl half-time shows). Oh, how often we have dishonored our heavenly Father! Instead of beacons of light leading them to our glorious Creator, we put up roadblocks. We preach one thing, but do another. How often do people look us and ask themselves, “Why would I want to praise a Father in heaven with bratty children like that?” We have those moments. What was Jesus’ judgment of that situation? ***“If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”***

That’s why Jesus is so important to us. Not because he is a great teacher who teaches better than anyone else, but because he is the great Savior. He is the precious Lamb of God, who takes away our sins. In that hope we cling to him day after day. Day by day we are forgiven through faith in him as our Savior. Then precisely because he is so wonderful, loving and forgiving we strive to live to his glory. Not so people notice us, but to be a light that draws others to God.

**D. Be that Salt and Light**

Here is the amazing thing: it works. Being salt and light works. Very recently this has been brought home to me as several Christians, completely without me asking, have personally shared about people who were salt and light to them in their lives.

One woman shared how she had not been close to God for a long long time. One day her best friend simply invited her worship. Since that day she has never looked back.

Another who also had been drifting away from God remembered how a pastor (not me) had persistently invited her to a closer walk with Christ. Finally she had to give in.

Another told how she was taking care on an elderly woman. That 89-year-old woman—89 years old!, just remember that if you think that God doesn’t have anything left for you to do when you celebrate your 89th birthday—she brought her caretaker around so that she, the caretaker, was baptized and to this day loves nothing better than time with her Savior.

Another recounted growing up in a godless house. On her first frightening day of grade school a Christian girl befriended her. In short order this friend got around to telling her about her Savior for the first time in her life. And this girl would go back home and in the evening kneel beside her bed to pray to Jesus. Members of her godless family would peek through the keyhole to see her praying. Then they would mock her, “Did God hear ya?” so godless was her house. Yet she never stopped praying, so powerfully had the Holy Spirit spoken through her Christian friend.

These are people I know, you know, not stories I googled.

What is your story? Who was the salt and light for you? God didn’t part the clouds and convert you with a vision direct from heaven. There was someone. God used a person, another fallen, saved human being, who lived out their Christian faith in your sight, who spoke of the Savior in your hearing, and who led you to praise your Father in heaven. Now it’s your turn.

***“You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world.”*** YOU! Amen.