

Matthew 5:13-20

“Living as Salt and Light”

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (A)

February 5, 2023

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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:

Some time ago, I heard it said to me: “You know what would gain church attendance?” “What?” I asked. “Stop talking about repentance. People don’t want to hear that. Let me worship God in my own way. You need to adapt to the culture.”

Let me ask you, what would happen if we did just that? Our numbers may increase, but that’s doubtful. It’s doubtful, because the ones who want the church to adapt to the culture are the ones who have no intention on coming anyway. But, if we did that, would Prince of Peace Lutheran Church still be a Christian Church? If you ceased speaking God’s truth, would you still be a Christian? If we ceased calling sinners to repentance, would we still need a Savior from our sins?

Last week, Jesus began His most famous sermon, which is known as “The Sermon on the Mount” with the Beatitudes. Jesus began speaking of God’s blessings that rests on every true believer in Him. Today, Jesus continues as He speaks of the blessings we prove to be to the unbelieving world as we live as salt and light.

Jesus begins saying to His followers: “***You are the salt of the earth***” (Matthew 5:13a). It is likely that when you think of salt, you think of salt as a seasoning. It certainly is, but in the first century salt was used primarily for another purpose: as a preservative. Back in a time before refrigerators and freezers, salt was used to preserve food from spoiling. But how are we “***salt of the earth***”? How are we a preservative?

Jesus says “***blessed are you***” to be salt of the earth. We are blessed to be given a responsibility. As the preservative, Christians are called to be the check of moral corruption in the world. Jesus says, “***You are,***” and not, “***You ought to be.***” As the salt of the earth, we curb the immoral, godless living of the unconverted world.

Oh, how things would have been much different if there had been ten righteous preservatives in the city of Sodom. God would have spared Sodom. Today, God preserves the whole world through His salt of the earth – *you and me*. God uses us as His preservative in order for Him to rescue lost souls from destruction by bringing them the saving gospel of Christ.

But the sinful and corrupt world will not love us for acting as salt in it. The sinful and corrupt world would rather prefer us to be like honey. This is the greatest temptation for Christians. As honey, we try to not offend unbelievers by trying to be a salt that doesn't really bite into those who ignore or reject God. This is what Jesus was referring to when He said: ***“But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown down and trampled under people’s feet”*** (Matthew 5:13b).

Remember, Satan rules this fallen world that we live in. He is known by what he first said to our first parents: “Did God really say?” Ever since Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, each generation has faced that age-old question: “Did God really say?”

To the unbelieving world, they are not as aware of Satan’s deception as we are. Most think of Satan as a cartoon character with a pitchfork, or really as a figment of man’s imagination. And that is the way Satan prefers it to be. He isn’t all about wanting credit for his deceptions. He just wants us to go down with him. He never wanted to eternally suffer in hell by himself so he tries to take as many of us down with him.

Satan’s first deceit was questioning the truth of God. He has perfected this age-old trick. *“Did God really say every Word He says in the Bible is true?”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17) *“Did God really say repent?”* (Matthew 4:17) *“Did God really say there are only two sexes: male and female?”* (Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6) *“Did God really say living together before marriage is immoral?”* (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 7:8-9; Hebrews 13:4) *“Did God really say abortion is murder?”* (Psalm 139; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20) *“Did God really say that adulterers and homosexuals will not inherit His kingdom?”* (1 Corinthians 6:9-10) *“Why not just adapt to the culture?”* *“Isn’t God working through the culture to show what He approves of anyway?”*

As the world has become less salty, we see the outcome. The world has become more and more rotten, since there are fewer preservatives. Life is no longer sacred. This past Tuesday in our neighboring state of Minnesota, elective abortion was legalized up until birth.¹ The Wisconsin governor hopes to do the same.

In years past, we heard it said, *“Why do you care what goes on in the privacy of the bedroom?”* to justify civil unions. So many Christians remained quiet. Suddenly, out of nowhere, it’s deemed medically necessary to mutilate children if they feel like they are of the opposite sex.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/walz-to-sign-pro-act-tuesday-codifying-abortion-rights-in-state-law/?fbclid=IwAR083GCUsst7yYRPY0ia4-A7KXAYv-rboceWw2G3YRapsvcVE8Dd5xtLPJt4>

From what was deemed private has come into the public sphere with drag shows at libraries and even during the halftime show at a recent Milwaukee Bucks game. The rotten world is actively grooming both children and adults.

Many wonder what happened? What happened to our culture? I have heard it said: “*It didn’t used to be this way!*” Maybe it’s because Christians by and large toned down our witness of Christ? Or we said things and did things that would make Christianity more palatable to the unbelieving world? Or are we attempting to serve Christ from our sofas, rather than engaging one another? In doing so, much of Christianity has lost its saltiness.

Within the recent past, so many Christians and their denominations have lost their saltiness as they have failed to live and practice what they professed. One thing to note: if the corrupt and sinful world approves and respects you as a Christian or as a church, are you really being “salt of the earth”? Now, that is a good question.

So, if we should yield completely to the temptation and try to be salt that has no bite to it, if we should pattern our lives after those of the world, we would cease to be members of His kingdom. Then we bring the Lord’s judgment upon ourselves: we are no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled upon.

During the earthly life of Jesus, impure salt would not be thrown into a field, since it would kill the vegetation. It was certainly not good enough to eat. Instead, impure salt would be thrown into the roads, since there it would do no harm, for nothing could grow there anyway.

As Christians, we preserve the world as a curb to immoral living. We live as “*salt of the earth*” as we preserve the earth from spoiling. But Jesus continues. He also says that we “*are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14).

Again, Jesus says, “*You are the light of the world,*” and not, “*You ought to be light of the world.*” Due to sin, this whole earth is corrupt. To this corruption, God uses us as His salt. But this world is still living in deep darkness, deep ignorance, falseness, and spiritual blindness. To dispel this darkness, Jesus has placed His followers as the light of the world.

But how are we “light”? Recall what Jesus calls Himself: ***“I am the Light of the World”*** (John 8:12). So, when we follow Him, we walk in the Light, and only then. Apart from Jesus, we are not the light of the world. In other words, we have all our light from Him. Jesus is the sun (s-u-n), and we are the moons reflecting His light. Our Lord transmits this light to us and fills us with it through His Word and Sacrament.

In Christ, we are the light that shines in a dark world. Jesus adds: ***“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden”*** (Matthew 5:14b). What Jesus is saying is this: “The Christians in the world, will, by their very nature, bring the saving light God has given them to a world lying in otherwise hopeless night.”

Though the light shining from Christ’s church cannot and will not be hidden, we may be tempted to hide the light, just as we may be tempted to become tasteless salt – out of fear of those who shun and hate all light from above. To this, Jesus adds: ***“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”*** (Matthew 5:15).

It makes no sense for a lamp to be placed under a basket, since the room is as dark as it was before. Instead, people put the lamp on a lampstand, so that light can shine out and illuminate the room for those using it.

So, a Christian who hides his light in this world is acting contrary to the character Jesus has given him. So, if we cease to bring the Light of Christ to others, we not only fail to carry out our function as the light, but we would also lose the light and plunge back into darkness.

Think of it this way: if you put a burning lamp under a bowl, eventually the burning lamp will use up all of its oxygen and go out.

Now, Jesus is not telling us to parade our piety. He is rather urging us to live our faith even in the presence of the ungodly.

A couple weeks ago, a Philadelphia Fliers defenceman named Ivan Provorov was criticized and called “homophobic” and “transphobic” for refusing to wear a “Pride Night” hockey sweater during warmups. One sports commentator said of Provorov: *“The theme is hockey is for everyone. ... Stop offending people. This [sport] is supposed to be about inclusivity. What I heard him say was offensive. It didn’t make any sense.”*²

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yGm_E9Nj2Y&t=205s

So, what did this hockey player say? “I respect everybody’s choices. My choice is to stay true to myself and my religion. That’s all I’m going to say.” Then the media questioned him, “What’s your religion?” He said: “Russian Orthodox.”³

To this, that sports commentator concluded: *“Nothing scares me more than any human being who says: ‘I am not doing this because of my religious beliefs.’ Don’t give me that! Don’t feed me the religious beliefs line. The [NHL] today needs to fine that organization a million dollars and reevaluate how they support gay rights, because that is insulting.”* In other words, he’s saying: keep your Christian faith to yourself, keep it hidden.

Provorov could have given in and wore the hockey sweater, but he didn’t. He refused to relax his Christian faith. He may not have realized it, but he was salting the earth and being a light of the world. Even if the ungodly ridicule our godly ways, the time will come when they have to acknowledge our works to be good. St. Peter proclaims: ***“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation”*** – that is, the day God reveals Himself to them (1 Peter 2:12). You see, experiences with Christians may make unbelievers more likely to consider what Christians teach.

The question for all of us is this: Do people outside these church walls know that you are a Christian? Or do you just blend in with the world? It is not enough to say that you are a Christian. It’s not enough to only know God intellectually. We must also bear witness to the world that He is our Father and we are His children.

Now, in case you are wondering if your saltiness and your light isn’t where it should be, the Triune God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – has the antidote. This antidote is His Means of Grace: Word and Sacrament! This is why you are here in this place today! Through hearing His Word and receiving Christ’s Body and Blood, He strengthens our faith so that it is tasted and is seen!

Yes, we may still be hesitant in proclaiming the one true Christian faith. But all it takes is courage. If we do not publicly profess what we believe, to a certain point, we won’t believe it. Remember what Christ’s calls His disciples: blessed. And so, we are!

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nce9VTthdGE&t=34s>

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 as the salt and light of the world. Amen.

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

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +