

Isaiah 58:3-9, Matthew 5:13-20
Epiphany 5A
February 9, 2020

“Stirred Up to Serve God”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus speaks to us today in the famous Sermon on the Mount. He’s just told His disciples, those who believe in Him, including you and me today, in the Beatitudes, (Matthew 5:1-12) “*You are blessed.*” Not “you will be blessed someday” ... but, “You are blessed NOW!” And because you are blessed, (Matthew 5:13a, 14a) “*You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world ...*” Again ... not “You will be salt and light.” He tells us, “You ARE salt and light.” And then He calls on His disciples to do something, (Matthew 5:14b) “*Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” “Salt and light” ... these two items go together here. They are dependent on one another. They go together like “lightning and thunder,” “day and night,” and “sun and moon.”

Let me explain with a little demonstration. Imagine a small light bulb connected to a battery with the circuit running through wires and a small bowl of water. The bowl of water keeps the battery’s power from lighting up the light bulb. But, if I stir some salt into the water, the salt enables the water to complete the circuit ... the light bulb lights up. Without the saltiness of the salt, stirred into the water, becoming part of the water, the light doesn’t shine.

(Matthew 5:13a, 14a) “*You are the salt of the earth ... the light of the world ...*” Essentially, faith, which God puts into our hearts, stirred into our lives by the Holy Spirit throughout our lives, seasons our works ... causing them to be good works through which we reflect the Light of the World – Jesus Christ – into the darkness around us. We’re stirred up to serve God!

Saltless lives fail to reflect the Light of Christ into the world. No matter how good we might think these works are, without faith in God, they fall short of being truly good works.

Unfortunately, these kinds of lives are all too common. Lives without faith do not reflect the Light of Christ into the darkness of the world ... they do not bring about changes in hearts hardened against God and His intentions for His creation. To the eyes of the world, saltless lives may look fine. But, to the eyes of God, they are anything but. This has been going on for millennia. Listen to God speaking of His people Israel through His prophet Isaiah, (Isaiah 58:3b) *“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.”* The fasting is a form of worship – like prayer, music, and devotion. A fast is most often seen as depriving oneself of something. However, it’s only effective if it’s seasoned with the salt of faith which enables the Light of Christ to bring about true change in personal behaviors which reflects the Light of God’s will into the world. But in Isaiah’s time, while the fasting looked nice on the outside, it lacked any kind of inward change of heart as selfish pleasure seeking, oppression of others, quarreling, fighting, and the flashing of fists still dominated their daily actions.

In Jesus’ day saltless adherence to God’s law, the word of His prophets was the way of the world. Jesus frequently points out the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees as examples of those who proudly perform outward self-righteous acts recorded in the law while failing to be the salt and light God calls them to be among the people. Jesus says, (Matthew 23:3b-5) *“(The scribes and Pharisees) preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others.”*

Even today, in the world and in our “so-called” Christian nation we see potentially meaningful rituals devolve into empty acts, devoid of “saltiness.” One of the professors at our seminary reminded me that our president is sworn into office with His hand on the Bible. Congress opens its sessions with prayer from the chaplain. Our money says, *“In God We Trust”*

on it. And the Supreme Court comes to order with the words, “*God bless the United States and this honorable court*” in a building where Moses is prominently displayed holding the Ten Commandments.¹ Yet we too often see sides claiming the moral high ground through saltless works as they break out in harsh insults, fists, and worse. Even a National Prayer breakfast ... where God is to be at the center of attention ... both sides seem to use prayer as a weapon to advance self-centered desires and agendas while inflicting more harm and discontent, stirring up conflict and chaos ... not the saltiness of faith and the Light of Christ. And, if we’re honest with ourselves, there are moments when you and I fall into the same saltless words and deeds ... meant to look good to those around us, but motivated not by our faith and trust in God, but by our own self-centered desires to look good in the eyes of the world ... the Light of Christ covered by our selfless actions.

The scribes and Pharisees, lacking any kind of salt in their faithless acts of worship, prayer, and devotion sought, not to cover it up, but to extinguish the Light of Christ by glorifying themselves over God Himself. Their faithless acts, while building themselves up, raising themselves onto a pedestal of privilege for all to see also led down a slippery slope ... to the point where they lured one of Jesus’ disciples to betray Jesus for petty cash.

They took Jesus captive in the dark of night ... when nobody could see their hellish deeds. They convicted Jesus falsely based on lies from witnesses who couldn’t agree with each other ... conveniently forgetting for the moment God’s law stating, **(Deuteronomy 17:6)** “*On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.*” Then they turned to Pilate, a

¹ Dr. Rev. Reed Lessing, *Concordia Commentary: Isaiah 56-66*, pg 150, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 2014

pagan, a non-believer ... a man they should've been reflecting the Light of God's Word upon ... to snuff out the light ... sentencing Him to death on a cross.

Jesus, the Light of the World, was crucified. Even the light of the Sun failed and the Son's light was extinguished. He hung bloody, limp, and lifeless.

To the world, the Pharisees, Pilate, and others, it looked like this troublemaker was gone. They'd removed His saltiness from the world. They could go on with their lives. Even Jesus' disciples wondered, "*What now?*" They buried Him ... sealing the Light of the World inside a cold, dark grave. The Salt was gone. The Light was out. Jesus was dead and buried.

There's this thing about salt though ... you can't ever really get rid of it completely ... ever accidentally mistaken salt for sugar baking cookies – used a cup of it instead of a teaspoon?

And no matter how many coverings you put over a light, it's still there – waiting to burst out!

Though Jesus was, in fact dead, His salt and light remained ... in God's Word and His promises of old. And three days later, the Light of the World burst forth indeed! Jesus rose from the dead and the light of His glory shined for all to see! By His living presence among His disciples, He stirred up the salt, restoring their saltiness so they could continue reflecting His light into the world! Charging them, **(Matthew 28:19-20)** "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" Called to be salt and light in the world, the disciples did just that ... becoming **(Acts 1:8)** "*(His) witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*"

The Light of Christ continued to emanate through all time and in all places. Through Jesus' disciples' faith-filled lives, it has penetrated the darkest of darkness right up until today ... when you and I have been called by Jesus, **(Matthew 5:13a, 14a, 16)** "*You are the salt of the earth ...*

You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Our faith, it's saltiness is restored as it is stirred up in our lives ... here in worship today – by His forgiveness of our sins, as well as, His Word and Sacrament. And then, throughout the week, even as our salt settles, He stirs it up again as we come to Him in prayer and spend some time in His Word. The Light of Christ shines in our faith-filled words and deeds. Jesus, Immanuel, “God with Us” is with us always. As He goes with us, reflect on what God tells us in Isaiah 58:8-9. Please open your Pew Bibles to page 618 as I summarize. The Light of Christ shines brightly ... it reflects off us into the world. It brightens the darkness even more than a full moon reflecting the light of the sun on a cloudless night. The healing of sin and the wounds of conflict caused by sin takes place ... satisfying relationships God intended will replace conflicted relationships filled with quarreling, fighting, and fists. Our righteousness will flow out from us as we become answers, through our faith-filled works, to other's prayers. And all this happens, as God protects us from evil ... strengthening and enabling us to trust Him even more, knowing from His Word that He is with us always, to the end of the age.

He is here, with us right now and in everything we do. By the power of the Holy Spirit, He is transforming each of us ... forgiving us when we fall short ... constantly bolstering our faith as He stirs up the salt in our hearts ... enabling us to reflect the Light of Christ into the world for all to see. And one day, as our lives in this world are finished ... when He has fully transformed us into the creatures He created us to be ... we will stand before Him, basking face-to-face in the radiant light of His glory in heaven.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. Amen.

James Kent