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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 5, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:13–20

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

During the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus spoke directly to His disciples and described what kind of people they were to be. “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” Notice the direct, person-to-person, discourse. You are these things: salt and light.

Who are the “you” being addressed here? The blessed ones of the Beatitudes described in vs. 3–12. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted for the righteousness of Jesus. These blessed ones are the salt and light of the earth. The Lord Jesus is talking to you and about you. You are His blessed one baptized in His name and filled with His Holy Spirit. You are the salt and light of the earth.

To us moderns, being described as salt might sound a bit strange. Today, salt is pretty much used for flavoring. And for you foodies out there, you can even choose between regular ol’ table salt and sea salt. But in the ancient world, salt was very valuable. It preserved food; sometimes functioned as a means of payment for wages. It was even used in some OT sacrifices. Over time, it became a symbol of purity, wisdom, and loyalty. So when someone calls you a “salt of the earth” type person, they are paying you a high compliment indeed!!

Being described as the light of the world might cause us to demur a bit. We are quite accustomed to saying that Jesus is the light of world (John 8:12). Light is that marvelous creation of God that literally casts out darkness. Because of that quality, we use light as a metaphor for knowledge, virtue, goodness, and security.

Yes, dear saints of God, you are the salt and light of the earth!! And only Christians can be the salt and light that Jesus is describing. For only His blessed one, His redeemed people, are born again through water and spirit.

The world needs you to spread your salt and cast forth your light. For only you can give the wholesome truth, holiness, and goodness the world so desperately needs.

The question then becomes “How do I, as a blessed child of God the Father, salt and enlighten the earth?” We must always remember that you don’t become the salt and light of the earth, at least not by your own power. You are made salt and light by the grace of Jesus. God’s Trinitarian name was splashed upon you in baptism. Through that holy event, you were robed in the righteousness of Jesus. His body and blood mark the door posts of your mouth and heart. Your saltiness and your light come from Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. You don’t decide to become the salt and light of the earth. Jesus makes you like Himself.

Maybe we should ask ourselves rather, “How do I live as salt and light?” By means of the good works you do through your various God-given vocations and relationships. Are you a father, husband, son, or brother? Then give the salt and light of Jesus to your children, wife, parents, and siblings. Are you a mother, wife, daughter, or sister? Then the salt and light of God’s love and grace are shown to your children, husband, parents, and siblings. Are you a citizen? Then the salt and light of good works are distributed there in voting and other civic activities. Are you an employee? Or maybe an employer? Salt and light are spread freely into these areas of life too. In other words, in every area of your, in every situation, you share God’s goodness graciously, freely, magnanimously, joyously.

You see, it’s just who you are in Jesus. God’s blessedness is always with you. So you take the salt and light of being blessed in Jesus into every area of life.

Jesus does, however, give a strong warning about neglecting our peculiar gifts. The Lord says that if salt loses its saltiness, then it is “good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet” (vs. 13). Similarly, a lighted city can’t be hidden. And one doesn’t light a lamp in order to hide its light under a basket (vs. 14–15). Unsalty salt and hidden lights don’t make a lick of sense. Those noble qualities given to us by divine grace and love can be lost through sin and vice. The good works flowing from faith become choked, muted, and finally lost. Do we not recall Jesus’ parable about the seeds of the kingdom being cast upon different types of ground? The seed of God’s Word grew in peoples’ hearts but then it died because of persecution and tribulation or through cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. As God’s blessed children, we daily live in repentance and faith. Do not neglect these peculiar gifts of grace.

Your salt and light are to be spread into every area of life by your good works. Jesus says (vs. 16), “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.”

Some Lutherans get very nervous about any discussion concerning good works. As soon as those two words are spoken, “Good works”, you immediately hear, “But we cannot be saved by our good works. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone!” True enough. And thanks be to God that we aren’t saved by our good works for we would all despair. But the Lord Jesus isn’t talking about doing good works in order to become Christians. Rather, we do them because we are already saved by grace through faith.

Jesus says “You are (a statement of fact, vs. 13 & 14) the salt and light of the world.” Doing good works is simply what you do because of who you are in Christ. If you light theological grammar, we say that the indicative “you are” is given to you by the grace of Jesus so that you can do the imperative “let your light shine” with the result that those who see your good works will “glorify your Father who is in heaven” (vs. 16). We do good works because of what God the Father has done for us in Christ Jesus through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds. Our good works are but reflections of the good work God the Holy Trinity has done in our lives through the gospel. That’s an incredible privilege and honor.

Good works, as God sees them, are defined by His holy Law, the 10 Commandments. Look at vs. 17-18, Jesus says, “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.” Jesus doesn’t throw away God’s Law. He fulfills it, perfects it.

We, God’s blessed people, spread the salt and light of good works as defined by God’s commandments. And so we teach that “You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. Remember the Sabbath day. Honor your father and mother. You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, nor covet your neighbors’ things.” This is the great value of the Small Catechism’s explanations to the Ten Commandments, “We should fear and love God so that we do not...and that we do.” And the Table of Duties, included in the Small Catechism, provides Biblical instruction on how we fulfill our various vocations. The fulfillment

of God's commandments is love, love for God, love for man. Our good works flow from the perfection of Jesus and bring glory to Him alone.

Don't be afraid that somehow we are compromising the gospel of salvation by teaching good works. To be great in God's kingdom, according to Jesus in vs. 19, is to not only to teach God's commandments but also do them (vs. 19). Our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because our righteous comes from Jesus. He kept and fulfilled God's Law and will. That perfection flows into our loves through the Lord's gospel and then manifests itself to the world through our good works.

I would like to read to you a passage from Titus 2:11–14. These are the Apostle Paul's words of encouragement to a young pastor, reminding him how things should work in Christ's Church:

<sup>11</sup>For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,  
<sup>12</sup>training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, <sup>13</sup>waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,  
<sup>14</sup>who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Today, I would have you set free in Jesus. In His freedom, be zealous in doing good works. Today's Psalm says it a bit differently but poetically beautiful, "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!" (Psalm 112:1). Rejoice in doing good! Delight in His commandments.

Jesus is the light of the world shining through you, His redeemed people. The salt of Christ's sacrifice is stored in your hearts and minds. His light shines and His salt spreads through you. Such is your noble and glorious calling as God's people through whom the world is blessed and the Father is glorified.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.