

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 9, 2014

Text: Matthew 5:13–20

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

You are a peculiar people. Don't take me wrong. I'm not saying you are odd or strange. But you are different from the rest of the world. Jesus says His people are salt and light. The world is a different and better place because of you; because of Christ's Church. You are a unique, peculiar people. And thanks be to God for this grace given to us through the gospel of His dear Son.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew 5:13–20 describes the unique position we have as God's people. Only Christians can be the salt and light of the world as Jesus describes in today's gospel reading. No one else has this calling; you are the salt and light of Christ in this place.

In vs. 13, Jesus says "You are the salt of the earth." Salt had many different functions in the ancient world. It was a preservative, a seasoning agent, and it supported life; salt is used in similar ways today. One unique function of salt is that it was included in some of the OT sacrifices. In the ancient world, salt became a symbol of purity, wisdom, and loyalty. In other words, salt was good. Because God's people are blessed in Christ, you are all these things and so much more.

In vs. 14, Jesus says "You are the light of the world." Light casts out darkness. Darkness is the arena of ignorance, vice, evil, and danger. Security and safety come with light. Two weeks ago, we read in Matthew 4 that the light of the world began to shine in Jesus. Where there had only been darkness, despair, and death, God's saving light shone as a beacon of hope and salvation. Jesus healed the sick and diseased; He forgave the sins of all who came to Him. Light was conquering darkness.

The world, in contrast to the goodness of salt and light, is corrupt and deficient. It needs to be salted and enlightened with truth, holiness, and goodness. And only God's people can give what the world so desperately needs. "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world," says Jesus. Only you can fulfill this peculiar work of goodness.

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; He makes you His unique, peculiar people.

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, offer strange warnings 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 feet” (vs. 13). Similarly, 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 just don’t make 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. As God’s children, we daily live in repentance and faith. Do not neglect these peculiar gifts of grace.

Instead, 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.”

Now we Lutherans often get nervous when we hear those words, “Good works.” We can’t be saved by good works. We are saved by grace through faith and that not of

ourselves it is the gift of God in Christ! That's certainly true. But Jesus isn't talking about doing good works in order to become Christians but 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 we do because of who we are in Christ. Those good works bring great glory to our Father in heaven. We love others – our family, friends, neighbors, strangers in need, even our enemies – because God first loved us. Our good works are but reflections of the good work God the Holy Trinity has done in our lives through the gospel. You are a peculiar people, made unique and glorious by God. Our salt and light, our good works, are simply God working in us and through us. 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. When Jesus says an iota and a dot will not pass, He simply means even the smallest part will not be neglected. In today's way of speaking, we'd say He's crossed every "t" and dotted and every "i".

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." The fulfillment of God's commandments is love, love for God, love for man. Our good works flow from the perfection of Jesus' fulfillment of God's Word.

People of God, we are called to do good works. We need not 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).

Today, I would have you set free in the joy and peace of Jesus to do good works. Joy and freedom come from the knowledge that you are already a Christian. Your good works don't earn salvation. That's given in Jesus alone. Your good works, your salt

and light, are shared simply because your neighbor – whoever he or she may be – simply needs them and our heavenly Father is glorified because of them.

You Christians are a unique, peculiar people. We have a purpose that no one else in the world can fulfill. God's salt and light can only come from God's blessed people. We can truly delight in God's commandments for their fulfillment came with Jesus. We are extensions of His ministry of salt and light.

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.