

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church  
Shobonier, Illinois  
Epiphany 5  
February 5, 2023  
Matthew 5:13-20

Salt, Light, and Righteousness

[Jesus said,] "You are the salt of the earth, . . . You are the light of the world. . . . unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:13-14, 20 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Today we hear our Savior and Lord say, "You are the salt of the earth." Now while that does have something to say to us, it was spoken specifically to His disciples, those who would be His apostles. And He declares that THEY are the salt of the earth, or rather, that they will salt the earth. And this only by virtue of their being called to be Jesus' disciples.

Thus, Jesus is teaching them what He is making them to be so that we might be saved. Indeed, they are the salt of the earth by preaching God's Word and especially the Gospel of the full and free forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake. And as we hear that Word we are not so much salt as we are salted. Yes, those apostles of our Lord have salted us with their New Testament teaching concerning Christ and how He comes to us through His Word and His Baptism and His Holy Communion.

And why is it good that we would be the ones whom the apostles of our Lord have salted? Because salt kills. Through the preaching and the baptism that Jesus gave these men to distribute into the world (Matt. 28:19-20), we get put to death like a salted slug. The preaching and the baptism of the apostles—that is, the preaching and baptism of Jesus—continually does its good work of working death in us, because "nothing good dwells in me, that is in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18). Because of the divine salt delivered by the apostles of our Lord, you and I and every Christian can confidently say, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20, compare Col. 3:3).

But salt not only kills, it also preserves. Through the preaching and the baptism that Jesus gave to His apostles, we get preserved unto eternal life. The preaching and the baptism of the apostles—that is, the preaching and baptism of Jesus—continually does its good work of preserving us against all evil and protecting us from all harm. Because you have the good and salty Word of the apostles living and dwelling within you, you can confidently say, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18).

Likewise, we are not so much the light of the world as much as “the people sitting in darkness [who] have seen a great light” (Is. 9:2). A people upon whom the light of Christ has now dawned (Matt. 4:16). In our hearing, Jesus says to His apostles in today’s Gospel, “You are the light of the world.” With these Words, Jesus is assuring you that the New Testament preaching and Baptism of the apostles is really nothing more than the extension of Christ’s own life into our world, into our lives, into our here-and-now. Stated another way, Jesus closely identifies Himself with the apostolic preaching – the Law in all its harsh demands and accusations, and the Gospel in all its sweetness and comfort. You already know that Jesus Himself is the Light that has come into the world (John 3:19), the Light that the darkness cannot overcome (John 1:5). So Jesus wants you to know that His disciples’ teaching now carries Jesus the Light of the World to us, so that we will never more be cast into the darkness on account of our sins.

Does all of this mean that you and I have no role at all in shining the light of Christ into the world, or in killing and preserving the people of the earth by means of the apostolic teaching? Not exactly. For just as Christ inhabited the Word and actions of His apostles, identifying them as salt and light in today’s Gospel, so also Christ inhabits the Words and actions of all who receive the teaching of the apostles. We simply do not need to think of ourselves as the salt of the earth. We can recognize that the salt of the earth does its good and important work through us, and often despite us. In a similar manner, the light of the world continues to shine, with or without us. Yet, it would be far better for everyone if we each devoted ourselves to doing what we can to radiate the Light, even while we bask in it. Either way, “a city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Even then, as Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven,” He then declares that He did not “come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them.” The Law is still in force and we are to live according to it. And He ends up saying, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” You see, the Pharisees were all about the Law. They generally lived a good, outward moral life, even if they looked down on others. They certainly did their good works before men to be seen by them – remember the Pharisee praying in the temple. They probably thought they were salt and light to the people. But their lives were all about receiving glory for themselves.

But Jesus’ disciples were to have a righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. But they could never out Law the scribes and Pharisees, and neither can you. No, the only righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is the righteousness that Jesus gives. For He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. And so He did. He took the fullness of the law – every iota and dot – into Himself. He alone fulfilled the Law in every respect. He kept its precepts perfectly – always doing what they demand and never doing what they forbid. Even then, He fulfilled it by suffering the penalty for violating that Law as He sacrificed Himself on the cross for you. He, the righteous light of the world, went to the cross and died to complete the Law that says that there is a punishment for your sin. All the times you’ve failed to be salt and light in this sinful world, all the times you’ve conformed yourself to

the ways of the world, all the times you've forsaken God and His Word to pursue other pleasures and enjoyments, all the times you've neglected to love your family, your friends, even your enemies as yourself, all the times you've thought or spoken poorly of someone else, all the times that you relied on yourself instead of on the One who created and preserves you – all of that and more is forgiven by Christ Himself. He calls you to go and sin no more. So you are enlightened by Christ. It is by Him that your light can shine. Your righteousness in Christ does indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees because Jesus died and rose for you. Shine like light and season like salt, because you are redeemed and you are righteous. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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