

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany - A (2026)

Isaiah 58:1-9

Psalm 112:1-9

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

‘Jesus said, “*You are* the salt of the earth...*You are* the light of the world.”’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Salt and light. Two great metaphors for the Christian life. At some level of meditation or contemplation, neither is particularly nuanced, and I suspect we all have an innate sense of what these metaphors mean, even if we are not familiar with their spiritual context.

Today’s lectionary reading, Matthew, continues Jesus’ teaching from last week’s rendering of the Beatitudes. Similar to the Beatitudes, Jesus uses these Christian descriptors in the present tense: you, in both the individual and collective sense, *are* salt and light. In the same sense as our blessedness is experienced in the present moment, so is the reality of us, as followers of Christ, living ‘now’ as salt and light. These two Christian attributes, when used appropriately, change the environment around us for the better; however, when not in proper proportion, become absolutely useless.

Let me be clear, I am no cook, though I have learned to boil water. That said, I enjoy watching cooking shows on television. I like learning how dishes that look so fabulous are made to look rather straightforward to prepare, fully recognizing that what is shown on television is the result of a lot of the prep work being done earlier, before taping. What I’ve noted, however, among all these shows is that toward the end of the cooking process, the chef will sprinkle some additional salt, not a lot, mind you, but enough to bring out the dish’s ultimate flavor, what many written recipes have as ‘salt to taste.’

We all know this truism. Salt is a vital element in the cooking process. Salt enhances flavor, and it is never the main course. Salt knows its proper function, if

you will. Too much ruins the dish; too little and the cook runs the risk of a bland meal, a terrible outcome after the time and energy used to prepare it.

Similarly, Jesus uses the metaphor of light as a city built on a hill and explains that “no one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” As salt is an additive enhancing the flavor of food, light is a tool that allows others to see. Too much light blinds us; too little light keeps us and others in a state of groping for what is around us. Both salt and light are useful when used properly, and worthless when they are overemphasized or not utilized at all. So, cutting to the proverbial chase, salt that has lost its taste and a light hidden under a basket are useless.

Here’s what I think Jesus is asking of us: Do our lives as Christians add flavor to the world around us? Are our lives distinctive relative to the culture we live in? Are our lives using the salt that Jesus says we ‘are,’ making a difference in how we love God and neighbor? Do we bring light when we enter a room and engage with people, or do we bring along our own personal bushel basket, either as an attempt to keep the light for ourselves or as the proverbial Eeyore of Winnie the Pooh fame? Have we examined how salty or light-reflective our lives are in a world that is filled with blandness and darkness? Are we shining the light of Christ with actions of word and deed that bring love, hope, compassion, peace, and opportunities for reconciliation? If not, why not? Christians are not to become salt shakers in a cupboard or bulbs left in a box. If we do, we become salt that is thrown out and trampled upon, and bushel baskets on lampstands, good for nothing. Hard words to hear, aren’t they? These are not my words; Jesus is doing the teaching.

Here are a couple of other questions: Why is this teaching important? How do we retain our saltiness? How are we called in this transitional time to share our light? How do we become more of who Jesus says we already are? What are we doing individually and collectively that encourages others to come and ‘taste and see?’ None of these questions is hypothetical. They are practical and provide opportunities to delve deeper into our respective lives in Christ and with each other.

I wish I had all the answers, or at least some of them. Did you notice that Jesus doesn't really provide much in the way of answers either? He tells us that we have it in us already to do the work of salt and light, but it's up to us to work it out in greater fullness, both on our own and with the support of each other. We need each other along the journey, but we have to take the steps by ourselves.

The more I thought about it, though, I'm thinking that Jesus didn't give us specific instructions because we might tend to do salt and light actions out of duty, not out of love. Like the Pharisees who meticulously followed the law but failed to follow the spirit behind the law, we, too, might get caught up in 'doing' salt and light and fail to 'be' salt and light.

Part of this journey of sharing ourselves as salt and light to the world takes shape in our gathering as a community for worship, as we learn together the ways of Jesus over meals and times of fellowship, and when we put into action what we have learned in ways that add flavor and light, in ways that make Christ known that are genuine and truly life-giving.

What better way to explore some of this than during the upcoming season of Lent? One way we will work on our saltiness and light-bearing capabilities is by focusing on the habits of deepening our spiritual lives through various practices and disciplines. On Wednesday evenings in Lent, we will gather for fellowship over a meal of soup as we learn about ways that develop our spiritual souls, such that salt and light are the natural outgrowth. We are gifted with individuals in this congregation who have specific practices they employ for their own spiritual health, who have offered to lead specific sessions. I pray that these sessions will provide practical applications for us to explore on our own, hopefully developing habits that expand our relationship with God, nurture our souls, and inspire us to share our lives of salt and light with others.

Dear friends, Jesus tells us that we don't have to *become* salt or light; we already are. We have been called to live distinct lives as followers of his, and we cannot take this call lightly. Our lives matter and have purpose. We are called to change the environment around us, not with over-the-top displays of Christian religiosity, but in proper proportion to what is needed to make things more harmonious. Our

saltiness brings out the best in ourselves and others, and as we “let our light shine before others,” may they “see our good works and give glory to God our Father in heaven.” We have it in us; let us use it, and may God be praised. Amen.