

**February 9, 2020 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 5:13-20**

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fifth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said:] <sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

<sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Jesus speaks these words

to the most broken, forgotten, unimportant people in the world.

Today he continues speaking the sermon that he began with the Beatitudes – where he blessed the poor and hungry, the grieving and persecuted...

Now he calls them the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And he says it as a statement of fact.

It is simply true.

Jesus doesn't say - work hard and be good enough...so you can be the light...  
He tells us we already are.

And those riddles about salt that loses its saltiness...and lamps under bushels?

They're kind of nonsensical.

You know what unsalted salt is?

It doesn't exist! If it's not salty, it's not salt.

You know what a light under a bushel is?

Well...at best a snuffed out, bit of wick in a bowl of oil...  
at worst...a house fire.

Today Jesus assures us of who we are...  
so we can be who we are.

This is the struggle of the people in Isaiah's time,  
who we heard God addressing in the first lesson...

They are making their way back from exile.

They have forgotten how to be who they are...

what is of the essence to their life together...

which is to care for those in need...

to live in justice and love...

to be repairers of the breach...

which is such a beautiful and needed and difficult image  
that the words always kind of catch in my throat.

Working out how to be who we already are...  
it's the task of a lifetime.

But there are some really important truths we learn along the way...

and I think the images Jesus uses today

can point us towards some of those deep truths

that help us live as the children of God.

I want to talk today about two important experiences, in particular...

The first is when you realize you *really* matter...  
and the second is when you realize you're not the only thing that matters.

They are two sides of a coin.

(We probably all have slightly different experiences of these truths...  
We may not all feel them equally deeply...  
maybe you didn't learn them in the same order...  
or maybe you've discovered them over and over and over again...  
Probably we're all still discovering them all the time.)

When Jesus tells us we are salt and light...

I think these truths are a part of what he is talking about.

I wonder when was the first time you knew you were important - essential...  
that you really mattered.

For my part, it might surprise you to hear

that I was fairly confident of my own importance as a younger person.

(No? Fair enough.)

I was a theater kid. (Again...maybe not shocking.)

And what is interesting is that I felt so thrilled...

not so much when I was onstage...though I loved it.

I felt truly important when I got to help with the technical work backstage -  
when I was on the crew...

and even more when I ran sound

for a two-person play at the little amateur theater

in the town where I grew up.

The phone didn't ring on stage unless I was at my place,

ready for the exact words and actions that were my cues.

(And it didn't stop ringing when the actors picked up the phone

if I wasn't still paying attention, either...I also learned.

Nothing weirder than a phone that keeps ringing

after someone answers it...)

It was on me.

And it was exhilarating.

I've also learned in many ways over time

how I'm not the only one who matters...

and how freeing that can be.

I remember one of the first jobs I had  
where I realized that I didn't have the power to change very much...  
but that also meant I didn't have the responsibility to, either.  
When I realized I wasn't as powerful as I thought I should be,  
I was frustrated...  
When I realized that meant I wasn't responsible either,  
I was relieved.

I think when Jesus tells us we are salt and light,  
he is telling us both how important  
and unimportant we are at the same time.

Salt is essential. We need it to live.

Salt has been so important in history, in fact, it has been a form or currency.  
(I think I shared this last time we talked about this text,  
but I still find it so wild and interesting.)  
Rome actually paid soldiers in a salt allowance.  
(It's where the word salary comes from).

Jesus tells us we are salt.  
We are a key ingredient in God nourishing the world.  
Our chili cook-off chefs from last night would agree, I'm sure...  
we need salt.

And yet...we've all baked the cake  
(or seen the baking show where someone baked the cake)  
and put in salt instead of sugar...

Or maybe you've gotten a stern talking to from your doctor  
about your salt consumption...

There is such a thing as too much salt.  
Or, as theologian Douglas John Hall puts it:  
"One does not want a whole plate of salt."

In 2014, not long after I had moved away from Chicago,  
a wall collapsed in a Morton Salt storage warehouse...  
spilling tons (literally) of salt  
out into the parking lot of a car dealership next door...

(The aerial images are so strange and funny...  
because the Morton Salt logo of the little girl with the umbrella  
is painted on the roof...with the slogan "When it rains, it pours"...  
And then there's this avalanche of salt pouring out the side of the building....  
half-burying a dozen cars.)

The Acura dealership next-door to the salt warehouse would agree...  
Yes, there is such a thing as too much salt.  
Salt exists, Rev. Phil Ruge-Jones tells us, to season that which is not salt.

Light also is about what it illuminates as much as anything.  
It helps us see.  
The sun's light offers warmth and the raw energy  
that plants turn into sugars.  
It is a part of a cycle...It helps reveal and create other things that matter.

And there is also such a thing as too much light.  
It can hurt your eyes at its brightest.  
If it lasts too long without darkness and rest arriving...  
our bodies become exhausted.  
It's why leaving lights on 24 hours a day  
is used as a torture technique.  
We need light. But we need a break from light, too.

We are salt.  
We are light.  
We are essential.  
Thanks be to God.

And we are also not the main ingredient.  
We are not needed every moment of every day.  
Thanks be to God.

As you go out into what this week holds in store for you...  
I hope you feel how necessary you are...  
that the world needs you...that God needs you...  
that you have responsibilities  
in proportion to the gifts and power  
you have been given in this life...  
which are considerable.

And I also hope you feel that the weight of the world  
does not rest on your shoulders.

God is the source of the main ingredients  
to building a world of love and justice  
and wholeness and abundance...  
and we get to season the feast.

We get to shine light on that truth.

It is not up to us to make it true...  
only to be who we already are.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Be who you are.

It's what you were made for.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.