

February 8-9

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

“You already are the salt of the earth and light of the world!”

Growing up in Merrill, WI, I always loved going for family meals at Grandma and Grandpa Strasman’s house. Grandma always cooked a big German meal...well-done pork roast, dumplings the size of baseballs, sweetened sauerkraut, cucumbers and vinegar, butter-soaked vegetables, and of course... gravy. But without fail, grandma would taste the gravy at the table and say, “This gravy is too salty.” But it brought the best out in everything.

Salt, in the right amounts, brings out the best flavors. For example, caramels are good by themselves. But salted caramels covered in chocolate... now there is an invention.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” He is not saying you will become the salt and light... you already are.

In the first century, when Jesus was on earth, salt and light were very precious commodities. Salt was, and still is, necessary for the human body to live. Salt was used to preserve foods, clean wounds, and to help things taste better. Light is essential for the eye to see. If I heard Jesus call me salt and light, my ears would perk up.

So, first off, Jesus is telling his disciples you are precious and extremely valuable in my kingdom. Your job is to salt and light the world. Did you know that Roman soldiers in Jesus’ time were paid in salt? This is where we get the word “salary” from the Latin phrase “to give salt”. But if a superior said to you, “You aren’t worth your salt...” you better start looking for another job.

The second point I want to make is Jesus is telling his disciples to start small and go out and mix with the world. Dr. Jim Bailey says in the book *Contrast Community: Practicing the Sermon on the Mount*, about Christian community “Its saltiness is to be mixed with its environment, a tiny group affecting the larger society.”

What happens when you put too much salt in something? It ruins the whole batch. The third point is that there is an art in knowing how much salt you should pour on others in order to bring out the best in them. If salt is the Word of God, you don't hammer people over the head with scripture in order to bring them to Christ. Your actions and deeds speak louder than words. When Jesus tells the disciples to let their lights so shine before others, so that through their good works others may see God in them, Jesus is asking his disciples to be examples of his teachings... like not holding grudges or name calling, or praying for your enemies, or doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Eugene Peterson in the Message translation of the Bible translates the salt passage this way: "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage."

How can you lose your saltiness? This seems like a scary thing. Peterson says if you do, then you lost your usefulness and you might as well end up in the garbage. Losing your saltiness would not be a good thing. If the church waters down the Gospel where you only hear what you want to hear... the good news without a challenging word, then we have lost our effectiveness. The church then becomes irrelevant in the lives of the people. Salt has a transformational edge to it. A little salt changes the whole batch.

So, when we hear the Gospel of Jesus rightly proclaimed, it should cause us to change in some way. This is called the law. The law should convict us of our sin and drive us to the foot of the cross where we will find grace.

For example, in our first lesson, the Prophet Isaiah was calling out the abuses of his religion. The religious leaders would proclaim a fast and people would go through the motions of the fast and then go back to cheating people out of money,

Isaiah says of God, "Isn't this the fast I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...”

The church has a responsibility to the larger world that is not only helpful and supportive but is indispensable to the health and life of the larger society. In studying Luther’s comments on this passage this week, he felt like the church sold out to the German government and the princes. The church wasn’t calling out their abuses based on Jesus’ teachings. The church had lost its saltiness.

The promise in this scripture is Jesus already believes in us to fulfill our duty of being salt for the earth light of the world. We don’t have to earn those titles. You already are salt. You already are light. We are witnessing to our faith daily already, whether you know it or not. So, in your vocations at work, school, or at home you already are salting those around... hopefully bringing out the best in them. We do our best, don’t we? But keep in mind, the Holy Spirit will fill in the gaps.

Amen.