

Matthew 5:13-16

The Sunday School teachers could not believe their ears. So they listened again more intently, and sure enough, what they had heard was accurate. Some of them looked shocked. Others looked dismayed not knowing what to do. I heard it too from my seat next to the pulpit, but all I could do was grin. The children were singing, "This Little Gospel Light of Mine." The pews were packed with worshippers and the kids were singing loudly with gusto...especially one little boy who did not quite have the right words for one of the verses. When all the other children were singing, "Hide it under a bushel? No!" he sang, with all the sincerity his little mouth could muster, "Hide it under a bush? Hell no! I'm going to let it shine!" And he did. Not even the powers of hell could prevent him from showing everyone that he was a disciple of Jesus.

Sometimes I wonder if we have the tendency to go to the opposite extreme. As much as that little boy was proud to be a light in the world, are there times out there, and maybe even in here, when we make every attempt to hide our faith from others? When we do the very thing Jesus says people do not do...put their lighted lamp under a basket, a bushel?

Now let's make sure we're clear about one thing, and that thing is who you are. Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." He does not say you can be salt and light; not, you have the potential to be these things. He declares that you, in fact are, the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And this is a good thing. What He is saying is that you are His disciple. You are Christians. You are different from all other people in the world. How did you get to be salt and light? God did this. It happened in your baptism. There you were reborn as people for God's own possession. There He put His Spirit within you, along with faith, hope, and the love of His name. You, the baptized children of God are, by His working, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And therefore you are very useful to Him. When Jesus spoke these words it was an established fact that salt was useful for preserving food. It was a valuable substance. Roman soldiers at one time were paid with salt cakes called *salarium*, from which we get our English word "salary." Without salt food would spoil. The salt preserved it. And so Christians are the salt of the earth because, for the sake of His Church, God preserves the world. Abraham understood that and so he bargained with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the believers who lived there. But there was not enough salt in Sodom and Gomorrah to preserve those wicked cities. Had ten Christians lived there, God would have spared them all. But only four believers, four salt cakes--Lot and his family--lived in Sodom. And so today Christians are salt because God holds off, for now, judging the unbelievers for the sake of His elect.

Christians are also the light of the world because without the message of the Gospel the world would be in darkness. Your Christian witness to others, as insignificant as you think it may be--showing your neighbor that going to church is important to you, showing your neighbor in the pew that singing to Jesus and listening to His words is a Christian privilege, including your faith in your letters and conversations--all these things are light for the world; little lights, maybe, but even a flickering match in total darkness gives enough light to see the way.

With both salt and light, one thing you do not have to do is tell it what to do. Salt is salty, not because it learns to be salty over time...salt is salty by nature. Salt preserves food and adds flavor just because it is salt. And so with light. You don't tell light to shine; it just does. It is the nature of light to shine in darkness. The same thing is true of Christians. And isn't this a reason why Jesus compares us to salt and light? Christians do good works by nature. You don't have to tell a Christian over and over,

“Now make sure you go to church to confess your sins, hear Jesus’ words, receive His forgiveness and His body and blood.” It’s what Christians do! You don’t constantly have to tell Christians to love the Lord and keep His name holy, to honor father and mother, to keep the marriage bed sacred, to love your neighbor as yourself. Salt salts, light shines, and Jesus’ followers follow Him striving to obey His commandments.

So what is going on when a Christian is not doing these things? When a Christian is not acting like the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Jesus tells us. “If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” And with light He says, “Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket.”

When salt stops being salty, it can no longer be called salt. It is no longer useful. When light is hidden, it ceases to shine and can no longer be called light. And if you or I who are called salt and light because we are Jesus’ followers, stop following Him, stop hearing His words and receiving His sacraments, start relaxing His commandments as He warns us not to do, start living not for His glory, but for ourselves--then we have ceased to be Jesus’ followers, but we are wandering sheep, we are lost in the world’s darkness. And Jesus warns that salty Christians who have lost their saltiness will be trampled beneath the foot of God in the Judgment.

But pastor, is there any good news? Any hope for us? Because all of us, your pastor as much as you, have days when we are not very salty, days when our Christian light shines dimly, if at all. Yes, there is good news. Just as it is the nature of salt to be salty, and it is the nature of light to shine, so it is the nature of God to have mercy...mercy even on useless Christians like us.

Jesus, although He is pure salt, white, holy, salty in every way, never once losing His saltiness...Jesus allowed Himself to be trampled underfoot for you. The Chief Priests and the Scribes saw no worth in Him. They counted Jesus as being useless salt, good for nothing except to be crucified. And that’s what they did. They threw Him, like worthless salt, upon a cross. They trampled Him with their mocking, and beatings. They dumped Him outside the city upon a hill called Golgotha. He who truly is the Light of the world allowed them to snuff out His light. The world went dark as Jesus hung there. But on Easter morning, with a blaze of light, Jesus rose from the darkness of the tomb to be for you Light and Life.

There in Jesus is God’s answer to your unsalty life. There in Christ’s death and resurrection is God’s answer for our shame and guilt, our sinful tendency to hide our light under a basket. God’s answer is that He forgives you. His Son died for you. It is God’s nature to be merciful to sinners. In Christ Jesus He forgives all your sins, dear sinner.

And so you, Christian friend, can start shining again. Here in Jesus’ words and sacraments is the oil for your lamp. Here in the worship of God’s people, your God is making you salty again by returning you to your baptism. Here God is once again calling you salt and light, useful to Him as His witnesses to the world. Do I need to tell you to go forth from God’s House today and shine as lights in Augusta and elsewhere? Do I need to remind you to be salty in your life? No, it’s what Christians do. And it is what you will do, not by your strength and power, but by the power and strength of God, by His mercy, His forgiveness in Jesus which you receive here week after week. Amen.