

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 8, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
You are different to make a difference.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. ¹⁹ So 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 5:13-20 EHV

Last week we listened to Jesus preach the introduction of his sermon to us. And if you recall what he said, he laid the foundation for the three chapters that follow. He began his sermon by talking about how we are blessed! Nine times in twelve verses, each time prominently displayed at the beginning of the sentence so that no one will miss it: blessed. Pastor Buchholz helped us see what being blessed is all about. Being blessed is about having a full heart. It’s not about having more stuff in this world. It’s about having peace with God. Being blessed is realizing that I have a deep need for a Savior and God gives me such a Savior. He gives me Jesus. I have a hunger and thirst for Christ’s righteousness, which he freely and fully gives. So, God’s way of pinpointing our blessedness and happiness is not what you would have expected. He says things like: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:3,4,11,12).**

Isn’t that a fantastic way to begin a sermon? Jesus is the greatest preacher to have ever lived. With his words Jesus lifts our eyes from a world of sin and sorrow and setbacks and lifts them all the way up to heaven itself and shows us the perfect blessings that await us. In fact, they’re already yours. It’s only a matter of time until you see God’s face, until he wipes away your tears for the very last time, until you have no more sins to forgive, no more guilt to bear, no more needs to fill, no more pain to take away. But, before you jump out of your seat and shout with exploding joy, “Amen, Jesus! Take me home,” in today’s section of Jesus’ sermon he brings our eyes back to earth. Heaven is coming, but in the meantime, Jesus says, **“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”**

There is a reason why God doesn’t take every Christian from this world immediately at their conversion. There’s a reason why God doesn’t take every child at his or her baptism to heaven at that moment. Oh, we’re ready for heaven. And for us as Christians it would be better by far for us to leave this world and go to heaven. But God leaves us in this world because he still has a purpose for us on earth. You see, **you are different to make a difference.** Jesus uses two pictures for us today to show how **we are different to make a difference.** First, he says you are salt. Think of salt as the first-century version of a freezer. You’d pack your meat in salt to keep it from rotting. So, you are salt in the sense that you keep people from rotting. And then he says you are light. You can’t see without light. You actually need light to survive. Jesus says that this world cannot survive without you being the light. **“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”** So, why hasn’t God taken you home to heaven yet? Here’s the summary of what Jesus is saying. He hasn’t taken you home to heaven yet, because the world still needs Jesus. And it’s through you that God gives Jesus.

Just think about that. If there were no Christians on earth, who would show Christ to the world? The whole thing would rot and die; everyone in it would go to hell. So, in two short statements Jesus wraps up the purpose of our existence from our conversion to our entrance into heaven: **“You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”** Notice Jesus’ words very carefully. He doesn’t say, “You *should be* the salt of the earth.” He doesn’t say, “You *ought to be* the light of the world.” Nope. “You *are* salt and light.” Jesus simply declares this to be. You are salt! You are light! That’s just who you are. That’s just what he made you to be. And this is what you were made to do. **“In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”**

“Good works.” What are good works? Jesus helps us to understand them by saying, **“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them.”** Jesus didn’t come to throw out God’s commandments—not even the smallest one—he came to fulfill them. He came to obey them, all of them. Once we understand that, then it all starts to come together. This is how we let our light shine. We, the lights of the world, act like Jesus, the Light of the world. When we obey God, we look like Jesus. When we obey God, in a very real way, people see Jesus. Do you see that? Jesus came to fulfill all God’s commandments as the only way to save us from the judgment of disobeying those commandments. He obeyed all God’s law in order to save us!

Because of Jesus, we are different. We are *blessed*. We are his blessed people. We are his own family. We obey his commandments not as a way to get into his family, but because we are his family. We let our lights shine so more people can see Jesus through us. Does that make sense? A good work is done by the family member of God who has faith that Jesus has fulfilled all God’s commands for us. A good work is done by a Christian who shows Jesus by what he or she does.

Jesus says, **“Let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”** But maybe you are thinking right now and asking yourself the question, “Have I done that? When people see me, do they see Jesus? Or do they see someone who picks and chooses, who finds some commandments worth obeying and others...not so much? Do they see someone who would never bow down to Buddha or call on the name of Allah, but someone who doesn’t think twice about worshiping at the altar of materialism and teaching their children to do the same? Do they see someone who gasps at people who let four-letter words fly out of their mouths in public, but then allows gossip to roll freely off their lips in private? It’s a good question. When people see me, do they see the law fulfilled or the law destroyed? In other words, do they see Jesus?

Does that make you feel like saying, “Jesus, before you say that I *am* the salt of the earth and that I *am* the light of the world, you should take a closer look. I know that I should be, but I’m not?” My friends, Jesus didn’t make a mistake here. He says, **“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”** Remember Jesus’ introduction to his sermon. Remember Pastor Buchholz’ sermon last week. Jesus is talking to people who are blessed. You: the ones who are crouched down under the weight of your sin but are lifted high because Jesus has forgiven you. Jesus is speaking to you, people who are truly blessed: the object of God’s affection, the recipient of God’s favor; forgiven, and there’s nothing more to forgive; saved, and there’s nothing more to fear.

And that’s not because of anything you’ve given to him, but it’s because he has given everything to you. Not because you’ve obeyed God’s commandments but because he did for you, every last and least one. He’s taken away all of your sins and given you all of his righteousness. Do you see that? It’s not because of what you’ve done or might do that Jesus calls you the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It’s what *he’s* given to you. It’s what he’s *made* you. It’s not a command; it’s a statement, a fact. Jesus says to you, “My forgiven child, through faith I’ve made you to be exactly what the world needs. It needs people who have been touched by my saving acts. It needs people who have been impacted by my saving light. Now, be what you are. You are salt. You are the ones I send to preserve this world from death and decay. You are light. You are the ones I send to let your light shine so people may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven.”

How does this work? Let’s get practical with this. Think of the young woman who is filled with a past of regrets. She is lowly. But Jesus lifts her up. He wipes away her tears with his forgiveness. And she clearly sees. She sees other people not far away at all: her children, her coworkers, struggling under the weight of their sins and fears. She lends them her ear to listen and opens her mouth to speak forgiveness. And what do they see? They see Jesus.

She’s different to make a difference.

Or you see the young man who has fallen into temptation again and again. He feels the weight press him down, but he’s reassured of God’s love and strengthened by his grace. And so, he can stand up again. And back on his feet, he sees other people not far away at all: his peers, his neighbors, falling into temptation themselves, and they don’t even realize it’s wrong. He lives a life of love. He gently, humbly, patiently speaks God’s truth about sin and the power of Jesus’ death. And what do they see? They see Jesus. **He’s different to make a difference.**

Or you see the woman who has given so much to others that she feels like there’s nothing left to give. She is tired and worn out. But refreshed by God’s promises, she realizes that in God her hands are never empty. She sees other people not far away at all: her husband, her grandkids, her neighbors’ kids, for whom she can fold her hands in prayer, open her mouth to encourage, bend her knee to serve. And what do they see? They see Jesus. **She’s different to make a difference.**

And do you know what these people might not even realize? They might not even realize they’re doing it, because they’re simply being who they are, what Jesus made them to be: **Salt and Light**. That’s you. You may not notice it either. But according to Jesus, other people do. And that’s how he displays his greatness to them. Through you.

You *are* salt and light. **You are different to make a difference.** So that through you, through your good works, the people of this world may see *the Light* of the world and with you praise your Father in heaven and be with you forever in heaven. Amen.