

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 9, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
Theme: Salt and light

—Matthew 5:13-20

If someone were to ask me, “What are the people of Emmanuel like?” I could probably say a lot of things to describe you but after reading and studying today’s sermon lesson, I think I’ll simply say this. You people are bright ...and you are salty. Bright and salty.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what life as his disciples would look like. Of believers then and now Jesus said, **“You are the salt of the earth.”** And he also said, **“You are the light of the world.”** Salt and light, that’s what you are to this world!

What does it mean that we are the salt of the earth? Think of two main purposes for salt: It adds flavor and more importantly, it’s a natural preservative. Without it, food would be bland or even worse, it would quickly perish. Now think of how the phrase, “Salt of the earth” is used today when talking about people. You meet a person who is kind and caring, she is genuine and sincere, she is selfless, she is simply a good person and so in describing her you might say, “She is the salt of the earth.” The idea is that, when you meet someone like that, it’s a refreshing contrast in this world. It preserves a sense of hope. In a world that is perishing, in a society whose morals are rapidly decaying, you as a Christian are like salt. Through your Christian life and your confession, you offer a refreshing, bold contrast to the world around you. Your Christian life and interaction with people has a vital, preserving quality for this world because the testimony you give offers life to those who are perishing. In Colossians, Paul uses even uses the same word to describe a Christian’s speech, **“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”** The words we speak are not to be bland or empty, but full of grace and substance that reflects who we really are in Christ.

Then Jesus says this, **“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”** By calling us salt of the earth, Jesus isn’t flattering us. He highlights an important responsibility you have as a believer and he warns against losing that faith which sets you apart as the salt of the earth. Think of another phrase that highlights a quality of salt, “throwing salt on the wound.” That phrase means adding insult to injury. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not implying that we as Christians aim to be abrasive and we don’t go out of our way to be offensive. But I mention that phrase to make this point: Salt may sting. Its therapeutic qualities may initially cause discomfort. Its bold flavor may be unpalatable to some. Maybe sometimes we’re tempted to dilute the message of Christ in order to make it more palatable to some. Maybe we try to offer a bland or vague statement of what you believe so as to not go against the grain of society. We might be tempted to tone down our saltiness because we’d like to blend in and dabble in the unwholesomeness of the world around us. But what happens if salt loses its saltiness? It’s good for nothing, except to be thrown out.

It’s not by our own inherent quality that Jesus calls us the salt of the earth. We are salt, because by his grace he rescued us from a perishing world and from perishing in our own sin. It’s by his grace that he forgives every sin, every time our life and speech hasn’t been seasoned with salt. It’s that grace that makes us what we are and emboldens us to be the salt of the earth.

And if that were not enough, he also calls us the light of the world. **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.** Again, Jesus doesn’t mean to flatter us here, but he highlights the fact that as a Christian, you provide a bright contrast in a dark world. You serve the vital purpose of providing light for those who would otherwise be left in the dark.

People [don’t] light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Who would light a lamp and put it under a bowl? Why would we want to obscure or dim the light of the gospel that has so graciously enlightened us? Maybe sometimes, it’s out of embarrassment or fear. If I let my light shine, if I let it be know that I am a Christian in the way I act or talk it won’t make me very popular in many situations. Letting my light shine also has to do with my concern and compassion that I show to other people for the sake of Christ. I love because he first loved me. Do you ever feel so busy, so preoccupied with your own life that there is little energy or time to show Christian compassion to those around you?

Another challenge we face when it comes to letting our light shine is we think the spotlight is on us. When you do a good deed, when you go out of your way to be kind or helpful is your goal always that God be praised, or are you looking for a little praise for yourself? Later in the same sermon Jesus gave this warning, ***“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”***

Jesus calls us light not because we had any brightness of our own to offer. In fact, when Jesus came to us, we didn't even have a glimmer of hope. He came and found us when we were still in the darkness of sin, and by his grace he brought us into his wonderful light. He made the light of his salvation shine so brightly in our lives that the darkness of sin and death has been chased away. A light bulb or a wick, doesn't have any light in and of itself, it needs an energy source. Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome, and you are connected to him. You are no longer in the darkness of sin and unbelief, but you live in the light of his forgiveness.

When Jesus calls you a light, you're not simply a decorative light. Around Christmas, you go around looking decorative lights. The pretty lights are the main attraction. But you as a Christian are more like a spotlight. A spotlight that points to Jesus. We have spotlights in front of church pointing to the cross. We have a big cross on the outside and a string of lights around, all serving the purpose of illuminating the cross.

Here are just a few practical examples of how you might put the spotlight on Jesus: If you ever have an opportunity to be patient with someone, which is very likely if you regularly spend time around people, that's an opportunity to let your light shine. If someone ever notes how patient you are, instead of saying, "Gee, thanks..." give glory to your Father in heaven and testify how your God has been so patient with you. Let's say you have a friend whose life is just falling apart, and they ask you, "What's your secret, you seem to have things together." What do you say? First you have to be honest and confess that your life isn't perfect, you aren't as put together as it seems, but then give glory to your Father in heaven. Put the spotlight on Jesus who mends all brokenness and fills your life with love. Even and especially in the face of loss and pain let your light shine. That doesn't mean putting on a bright smile as you grin and bear it. It means reflecting a peace and certainty that in Jesus Christ. Even in the face of suffering you can be a light to those who are suffering in the dark.

A common complaint I've heard from those who have become skeptical of God, and especially Christianity, is, "Where is God when I am hurting? Where is God when terrible things are happening in this world? Where was he when I needed him the most?" First of all, in our utmost need, he was dying on a cross for you. But what about now? Why doesn't Jesus still come and meet with sinners who are lost? Why doesn't he still speak words of comfort face to face with people that have made a mess of their life to give hope? Why doesn't he still come to help the helpless? In fact he still does all of those things in a very special way. He shows compassion to people face to face; only he uses your face. He still stretches out a physical hand to help those in need; only he uses your hand. He has made his light shine in you, and he makes it shine through you.

May God continue to fill you with his grace so that you may be salt and light. Amen.