

Sermon – Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-12

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

5 Epiphany – Year A

9 February 2020

“Salt to Taste”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The Babylonian Talmud includes the story of a great debate that took place around the same time as the events of the New Testament. The Roman Emperor, no doubt for his own amusement and without any respect for actual wisdom, wanted to know who was wiser, the Greeks with their well-developed philosophy or the Jews and their centuries-old Torah. Sixty of the smartest sages of Athens were chosen. Standing against them was a lone man, Rabbi Yehoshua, who had witnessed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The sages pelted the rabbi with riddles, one after another, but were beaten back, outsmarted at every turn. Finally they asked, “When salt spoils, with what can one salt it?” To which the rabbi replied, in effect, “A mule giving birth will restore salt’s saltiness.” His actual response was a bit saltier, more colorful, but this is a family-friendly gathering! The Rabbi was right, of course; mules, the offspring of a horse and a donkey, cannot reproduce. A mule giving birth is as imaginary and impossible as, well, salt that has lost its saltiness. It’s not something that happens, so the rabbi’s foolish-sounding answer won the day. I know, you may be thinking, “I’ve had salt go bad.” Perhaps, but that wasn’t because of the salt. Iodine and other additives can degrade the salt on your kitchen table, given enough time. But salt? Good, old NaCl? Salt is what it is, and it remains salty.
2. Not long before the debate between Rabbi Yehoshua and the sages of Athens, another rabbi sat down with his disciples on a beautiful hillside overlooking

the Sea of Galilee. This rabbi, Jesus, begins his Sermon on the Mount with an odd description of the good life. He names one condition after another that we would call bad – poverty of spirit, meekness, persecution, and so on – and then has the audacity to say that such states of being are in fact signs of blessing. Our reading for today picks up where the Beatitudes leave off. “You,” Jesus says, “are the salt of the earth.” You, Jesus tells us, you are the ones who will go and draw forth the best from this world, just as salt draws out the best flavors already at play in a meal. But don’t dare lose your saltiness, Jesus says, because then you’ll be thrown out and trampled under foot. It’s easy to hear in these words a warning. Jesus expects us to be our saltiest selves or else. But can salt lose its saltiness? To be sure, Jesus was neither a chef nor a chemist, but he is the Son of God. I’m willing to bet he knows what he’s talking about. You are the salt of the earth. This is performative language. We are – and will remain – the salt of the earth because Jesus says so, so go and be who Jesus says you are. There is nothing to fear here. Stop worrying; start salting.

3. To drive his point further, Jesus mixes his metaphors, declaring that we are the light of the world. What kind of person would build a city on a hill or light a lamp and then cover these things up? Well, no one would do that! Be salty and shine brightly. Why? Now Jesus tells us: So that others will see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. We salt the earth to bring forth the best from this world God made; we shine with good works so that this world will see and praise its Creator.
4. How do we do this? In our sin, we have failed to be salt and light. We are the ones who need to be seasoned with forgiveness, the ones whose lives need to be kindled with the new light of a resurrection dawn. This, of course, is what Jesus has done for us, fulfilling the Law in its totality, obedient to God even unto death on a cross, foolish as that may seem. In so doing, Jesus sets us free from the Law’s demands. He has not, however, undone the Law. To be sure,

Scripture itself tells us that not all of the commands in the Old Testament apply any longer. And so it is that Jesus has blessed us not only with life abundant and eternal, but with the freedom to eat bacon, too. Thanks be to God! But the big ones? They still stand. The Ten Commandments continue to apply. And at the center of our ethical life, our lived response to God's goodness, is the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind; to love our neighbors as ourselves. To be salt, to be light, is nothing other than loving the God who saved us and serving the neighbor who needs us. You are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and this is how you live.

5. We might want more than that. The Corinthians certainly did, seeking human wisdom instead of divine foolishness. But the foolishness of the cross wins out every time. At some point in the past, you had water poured over your head. You were claimed in the Triune name of God. You were marked with a cross and sealed with the Spirit. And then you were given a candle. Here at Grace, the candle is presented by an Elder, welcoming the newborn Christian to our fellowship. And with the light we hear these words: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven." The words of Jesus on the hillside have become Jesus' words for you. Be salt. Be light. Shine brightly by doing good works. No, not to save yourself. You are what God names you; you are a child of God. Full stop. We follow the Law because it shows us how to love God by loving what God has made, this world and all its creatures. Even the people you don't like all that much.
6. This, frankly, is a timely reminder. For many reasons, the weight of the world has felt heavy this past week. Perhaps you've felt it, too. It's not just that there are so many challenges we are facing or that there is so much suffering. It's that for more people, more of the time, the cruelty is the point. This isn't new; evil has always had its grip on humanity. Our nation bears not only the

stain of lynching but the enjoyment of it. One need not search long to find photographs from last century of white people happily mugging for the camera in front of a recently-lynched Black person. The cruelty was the point. I am mindful of the 1,400 Jews of Tiktin in Poland, rounded up by the Nazis to be murdered. I visited Tiktin last year and learned how, before they were shot in the forest, they Jews were forced to walk there, knowing what would happen upon their arrival, just to inflict a little more suffering. The cruelty was the point. Thankfully, human depravity has not lately returned to such depths. But cruelty and bigotry are never far from the sinful surface. We shine Christ's light so that we can remain vigilant, and as a beacon of hope for those in despair.

7. There is room for honest disagreement about how to work through the issues of our day, from immigration to climate change to anything else. But as people of God, there is not room for us to be cruel. If you are enjoying another person's suffering, you're doing life wrong. If we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are not working to reduce the total amount of suffering in this world, we're doing life wrong. Isaiah knew that God isn't all that interested in our religiosity if we are just going to ignore the hungry, homeless, and oppressed. Jesus knows that evil and sin have the capacity to turn this world rotten. So Jesus adds salt: You. In a world in which cruelty and base hatred are on the rise, do good. Shine with the bright light of Jesus, knowing that the darkness cannot overcome it.

8. St. John Chrysostom wrote, "If you cannot find Christ in the beggar at the Church door, you will not find him in the chalice." Begging his pardon and recognizing that I will never likely be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, I disagree. But just a little. So how about this? Having seen and received Christ in the chalice of Holy Communion, open your eyes to the beggar at the door. To anyone in any need. You are salt, and that's what salt does. You are light. How else will they see God? You are a citizen of the

kingdom of heaven. So live like it. Through the cross of Christ, you belong to God. That is the single, unchangeable fact of both your living and your dying. Having no need to fear death any longer, live a life worthy of what Christ has done for you. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.