



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany February 9, 2014

“This Little Gospel Light of Mine”
(Matthew 5:14-16)
Rev. David K. Groth

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16).

Collect of the Day

O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

One time Jesus told his friends and followers, “You are the salt of the earth.” Those words have been worn smooth over time. But when Jesus said them they were stunning, startling words. He wasn’t addressing the social and political elite, after all. You could understand him saying it to the religious and political hierarchy of the nation. But these were fishermen, ordinary people, nobodies really, who had taken to following him around Galilee.

In the ancient world, salt served two purposes: to flavor food, and to prevent meat from spoiling. Salt has value only as it is applied to and acts on its environment. It seasons, enhances and preserves. It has little value until it touches something. So we, as Christians, if we retreat from the world, separate ourselves from the world, then we’re no longer helpful to the Lord in the task of enhancing and preserving and improving the world. If faith is just something between me and Jesus, then I’m not of much use anymore. Eat a tablespoon of salt and it will make you gag. Sprinkle a little on buttered sweet corn and something almost magical happens. It reminds me of what Mark Twain said once of clergy. Clergy are kind of like horse manure he said. Spread them out thin and they do a lot of good. But put them all in the same room and they raise a stink.

So also you are the salt of the world. As Christians, ours is the task of making an impact on the world, seasoning the world, enhancing the world, and also acting as a preservative against the corruption caused by sin.

I read in the newspaper recently that in a couple of states out west there are now over a hundred cafes where the

barristers serve you your morning coffee in bikinis, and sometimes in something less than bikinis. Now, ironically, feminist groups have been pretty quiet about this, and the Atheist Alliance of America hasn't made a peep about either. But there are certainly a lot of Christians contacting their mayors and town councils and governors and asking, "Really now, is this necessary? Does this make our city a better place in which to live? Do we really want our children to grow up with this as the new norm?" One of the roles of a Christian is to serve as a preservative against the corruption of sin in society. We don't like that role; we don't relish it. But it's a role we've been given nonetheless.

You are the salt of the earth. Salt also seasons and enhances. As salt we are to make the world a better place. And so we also advocate for the poor and the marginalized. We serve meals and collect food and clothing for the poor. We educate the young. We speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, especially the very young, the unborn, the very sick, the very old. And by the way, no organized group of agnostics has ever started anything like a "Bethesda Lutheran Homes" or an orphanage or assisted living for seniors. These are things that Christians have done and continue to do.

The Bible teaches that God intends to make right the whole creation, and he intends to use Christians toward that end. "You are the salt of the earth." Salt changes things. Rubbing kosher salt into a roast and letting it sit for a while and think about it itself before putting it into the oven makes a critical difference. And as far as I'm concerned, popcorn without salt is about as satisfying as eating those packaging peanuts. Christian influence is intended to improve the world. The aim of our good works is not to parade our own virtues, but to make the world a better place and, as Paul says in Titus 2, to make the Gospel more attractive . . . to "adorn it" he says (v. 10).

"You are the salt of the earth." Ancient Greek didn't have exclamation points, nor could you emphasize a word by using italics or putting it in bold type to add emphasis. But

what they could do was change the word order. There was lots of flexibility there. In Greek, you emphasized a word by putting it first in the sentence. So note what Jesus is doing here. “You are the salt of the earth”. That mirrors the Greek very closely with the word “You” coming first. “You are the salt of the earth.” And again in verse 14, “You are the light of the world.” It’s not the Pharisees that are the world’s salt and light. It is not those devoted to some other religion that are salt and light. It’s not just our overseas missionaries. It’s not somebody else. Jesus is looking you right in the eye. “You are the light of the world.”

And it makes you want to say, “Who, me? My little light? What possible light do I have to offer the world?”

You know, if the world were full of light, your little light probably wouldn’t add much. But the world isn’t full of light. In a lot of ways it is very dark.

One of our members is a nurse up at the hospital who works primarily with women giving birth. She has noticed a significant increase in Watertown of babies born already addicted to heroin or other drugs.

Divorce attorneys in town will tell you that pornography is playing a role in the majority of the ruined marriages they council.

And the newspaper last week reported most Americans say the country is heading in the wrong direction. Most say it is divided, and most are also pessimistic about the future.

The list could go on and on. More and more young men in our city are unwilling to commit to anything more than a sexual relationship. Marriage is out of the question, but sex certainly isn’t. Are we really better off because of this? Have we become a better people, a more noble people than we were fifty or sixty years ago? Or is it more the case that what we have seen over the last fifty years is putrefaction of a people, pure and simple, the corrosion of a culture, the rotting of human life. The world will never admit it, indeed cannot admit it, but what it needs is salt and light.

What does that mean for us? It means we must retain our Christian distinctiveness. Salt is essentially different from anything else it touches. And so are we. Our influence in the world does not lie in numbers and wealth and brute strength. It lies in being different *from* the world. That's how we influence the world, not by caving into the world's influence and becoming like the world. In the next chapter, chapter 6:8 Jesus simply says, "Do not be like them!" And he was referring to people of the world. Do not be like them. Salt is not popcorn. It is sprinkled onto popcorn and makes it better. We are to do the same for the world, and we do that by retaining our Christian distinctiveness. A city on a hill is one that stands out at night and is different from the darkness all around it. And so yes, that little light of yours can and does lighten a room.

"Let your light shine." You have faith in Christ. Don't hide it. Let it shine. You trust in Jesus to help you today; you trust in him for forgiveness. You trust him for salvation. Don't hide that trust. Go public with it. Let it shine. Unbelievers will see your life as different from theirs; they'll want what you have for themselves.

But here's the problem. We think we can't be the world's salt or light. We think to ourselves, "No unbeliever is going to look at *me*, listen to *me*, observe *my* life and find it to be proof positive that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world. I'm not nearly a good enough Christian to have that effect on people. I don't love others as I should, I don't speak with kindness and sympathy and wisdom as I should. I've got problems and everybody can see that I do! Maybe I can put money in the offering plate to pay for someone else to be salt and light, but I can't be those things myself."

You must stop thinking like that. It's not right. Think of it this way. Let's assume your vices outnumber your virtues, and they probably do. Let's assume your sin outweighs any good works you do. I'm sure that's very much the case. *Jesus knows that!* And he knew that about his early disciples too. He knew what manner of men and women they were. He knew how thickskulled they were. He knew how they would struggle with the desires of the flesh. He knew how the world would pull at them and how

often they would bend to the world's influence. He knew how self-centered they would remain and how hard it would be for them to live a holy life. Knowing all that he still called them to be the world's salt and light. Similarly, he knows everything about you. Still, he says to you, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

You think your little teaspoon of salt doesn't have much to offer the world. But think of it this way. You know someone who's munching from a bowl of unsalted popcorn not because he's on a low salt diet but simply because he doesn't know any better. Show him how much better popcorn can be with salt.

And you think your 25 watt light bulb of faith is mostly irrelevant to the world. But in many places, and in many rooms the darkness is so deep that even a 25 watt light bulb can lighten up the entire room.

I invite you to consider the remarkable possibility that you are a model of faith for someone right now. Don't underestimate how bright a light you have to offer. Remember you have Christ and his Word in your hearts. There is more brightness in you than you know, and it's because of him. Let it shine. Through his Word, Christ has made you different from the world. The world doesn't really need who you are by nature. It needs Christ who is in you . . . and there is quite enough of him in your life if only you are sure to live openly as his disciple.

Each of us, I believe, has light to shine. But that light is also for you. He has enlightened you with his Word. As salt changes the world, so also he changed you. He died for you. He redeemed you, changed your very nature. In baptism he washed you and changed your status from "not my people" to "my beloved." From child of the world, to child of God. From slave to sin to heir of the heavenly Father.

Here in the Lord's Supper, the Lamb of God he takes away your sin. When you leave this altar you're not dragging it around anymore. He frees you from its condemnation.

Because of him, you are a very different than you

would otherwise be. By nature, we're goats, but he has changed us to be sheep of his pasture, and lambs of his flock.

By nature we would *add* to the corruption of the world and it's blandness. But he has changed us to be the salt of the earth. By nature, we're dark as sin, but he ignited in us the light of faith and has changed us to be the light of the world.

Your faith . . . it's not just between you and Jesus. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

"Who me? My little teaspoon of salt? My 25 watt light?" Yes, you. Amen.

