

## **Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (A)**

February 9, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Isaiah 58: 1-12; Psalm 112: 1-9; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-16; Matthew 5: 13:20

*Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit.*

“You are Salt. Be salt! You are light. Be light!” This is what Jesus tells his disciples. This is what Jesus tells you and I. “You are salt. Be salt. You are light. Be light!” It’s so familiar but it’s not.... In these “watch-your-sodium” days, what’s with being salt? And light, well that’s as easy as a switch. There are so many lights in most towns and cities that you have to drive miles and miles to find a truly dark night sky to see the multitude of stars. So why be light? Yet those first disciples who heard this would have been stopped in their tracks, maybe even shocked, to hear Jesus exalt them as salt and light. When Jesus’ first disciples and early Christians heard Jesus telling them they were salt and light, they would have heard him saying they were significant and necessary to the world, to the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom. They would have realized Jesus was telling them they were vitally important to God and God’s redemption work.

In our times when we guard against too much salt in our diet, we can easily forget that a certain amount of salt is absolutely essential to life. Ask those who live in hot, parched places. Ask the troops sent to places like Iraq and Afghanistan. No salt can lead to death. Salt is essential. With our modern refrigeration and extended shelf life for much of our food, we can also forget that for a much longer span in history, salt was an important preservative for food. Salt prevented food from decaying. Salt was prized because it could keep valuable food from spoiling. Do you begin to hear what those early disciples heard? Salt — though only tiny granules, though seemingly ordinary and inconspicuous — salt is vital, necessary to life. “You, my followers – God’s precious children,” Jesus says, “You are salt – essential and important to God and God’s saving work. IF the world is to have life, receive the Kingdom, YOU, my followers, are essential — each and every day.” Hear it with all its intended power. YOU are the Salt of the earth! Be salt!

And light? Light is also essential for life too. Plants can't grow and animals and humans will suffer if deprived of light. Without light humans can develop a serious vitamin D deficiency. To those of us who have tried to find our way in a pitch-black place, we know the smallest light changes the whole situation. To those of us who have lived in places like Columbus, Ohio —known for its consecutive weeks of gray days without sunshine — we can tell you how a few hours of bright sun can lift you from the depths. And those who have lived in times of oppressive darkness, when circumstances seem to suck life or meaning out of your very bones, they can tell you how even the faintest glimmer of light, of hope moved them to hold on, even when they did not know how. Light and darkness has long been used in stories to speak of the battle between chaos and order, evil and good, life and death. Jesus says, "You, my followers – precious children of God — are of indispensable and life-giving importance." Hear it, "YOU are the LIGHT of the world. Be light!"

Jesus keeps nudging us with truth. What good is salt unless it's preserving and flavoring? What good is light if it can't be seen? In a very real sense, Jesus is telling us, You ARE salt. You ARE light — you can't change that — it's what you are as a child of God. So now what? Just keep the salt to yourself? Just shine your light here in church or when you feel like it? At our baptism we were called to live as salt and light, NOT to win God's favor but because that's WHO WE ARE. You can't help but be light so that others may see God's light. Why would we try not to be light? Why would we try to hide it? We who live knowing we have eternal life in Christ, we ARE salt so that other may know God's saving, zesty grace. You defy that which tries to destroy life by your very presence. Why would we try to act as if we are useless in this self-destructing world?

Now you may be thinking about what wattage of light you are or how appealing or flavorful you are as salt. That questions a diversion. Thinking your light isn't bright enough or your saltiness is blah, is just an attempt to excuse ourselves from living as the light and salt we are. If you're thinking, "How am I a light? How am I salt?" now you're on to

something. We are light and salt when we love God and love what God loves. We are salt and light when we follow God's commandments, "the outer evidence that we are God's distinctive people"<sup>1</sup> following the way of Jesus. And as we practice and grow in our understanding of loving God, loving what God loves and following the commandments, the very power and grace of God works through us AND continually transforms us to be even more able to love God and love what God loves. Practice will not make us perfect on this side of eternity. But practice loving and obeying our Lord WILL make us more alive, aware and passionate light and salt, more confident and willing to take risks and be a bolder but respectful witness for our Lord and faith.

Pastor Erwin McManus told about his son Aaron. He went to a church camp one summer. He was just a little guy and his parents thought he'd learn Christian camp songs and hear some good ghost stories around a campfire like they had when they were kids. But unfortunately, at this Christian camp, they didn't tell ghost stories. They told demon and Satan stories and when Aaron got home, he was terrified.

'Dad, don't turn off the light!' he said before going to bed. "Daddy, could you stay here with me?.... Daddy, I'm afraid. They told all these stories about demons.... Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe."

McManus said his first inclination was to wrap his son in comfort but then thought his son needed more to battle his fears. He said, "Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room."

"All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is the time when we ask God not just to keep us safe but make us dangerous follower of Jesus. Not harmful disciples but brave. Not overbearing or obnoxious but potently genuine and gracious. Dangerous disciples love powerfully but do not force. Dangerous disciples just can't keep their hearts and hands from reaching out with God's light and salt. We're not called to play it small and safe. We're light and salt!

Our purpose as church is not to help us live life on our own terms or the culture's terms of success but to live life on God's terms as God's representatives. Jesus wants more than our admiration; he wants our commitment. Jesus wants more than our worship and reverence, he wants us to take him and his teaching with upmost seriousness.<sup>3</sup> NOT to earn his love. We have that unconditionally. NOT to win our salvation — Jesus did that. Jesus wants us to love what God loves and follow the commandments because we are the way Jesus will make his case to the world. We are his showcase. What do we show? WE are his best or worst advertisement. What will others see? BE my light. BE my salt. Step away from playing it too safe and comfortable and accept the baptismal assignment to be dangerous and daring agents of God's saving grace. Be salt. Be light. Be who you were created to be — God's not-so-secret agent of transforming love.

Linda M Alessandri 2/8/14

#### ENDNOTES

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1. Rev. William Carter, "Following the Kiss" posted on [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org) for February 7, 1999
  2. Erwin McManus, "Seizing Your Divine Moment" PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5: 17-26
  3. Phil Thrikill, "What is Required of Us?" May 21, 2006 [www.esermon.com](http://www.esermon.com)