

February 5, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

by [Brian Maas](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

“You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world.”

For a lifelong, saved-by-grace Lutheran, these simple declaratives are sweet indeed. There’s no works righteousness sneaking in here. God has done all the heavy lifting; it’s a done deal. It’s “you *are*,” not “you should be” or “you may become” or even “you must.” You are, period. That’s grace.

The trouble, of course, is that the fullness of grace is in the details.

It’s easy to find a Christian who can recite the phrase “we are justified by grace”; it’s more difficult to find one who lives out a deep understanding of that phrase. For too many of us too much of the time, being a Christian is about morality, about sustaining a boundary that sets us apart—or, too often, above.

Isaiah makes short work of this notion. He cries out against the confusion of true and false worship, condemning God’s people for honoring the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. For this sham adherence to the code, they expect God to respond to their cries—and are disappointed when God seems not to notice. Through the prophet, God calls them to abandon their hollow obedience, that they might come to know God by fulfilling the intent of the law through just and compassionate care for the neighbor.

To be sure, that’s low-hanging fruit. That simple declaration is the foundation of nearly all prophetic proclamation. It’s not very original.

Still, the human propensity for rationalizing sinful, inward-turning behavior means it can’t be repeated too frequently. We are not only slow learners; we are, to borrow a

phrase, a stiff-necked people, stubbornly resistant to change.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus embraces and renews this prophetic message. Having just proclaimed the Beatitudes, the upside-down values of God's reign, he explains how these values are incarnated in the lives of believers. Just as God blesses the poor in spirit because God chooses to do so (and not because people have rushed to spiritual poverty to earn that blessing), so God simply chooses to create and commission salt and light for the earth. By grace, God chooses us.

That said, it's clear that it's a lot more complicated for us to actually *be* salt and light than it was for us to *become* salt and light. Being salt and light involves giving ourselves away completely. True salt, salt that has not lost its taste, disappears into food to make the food tastier. Jesus' disciples transform the world by disappearing in humble service. Life in a world thus salted is savory.

Likewise, light that is not bound by obstructions dissipates over miles, like the ripples of self-giving service. Life in a world so enlightened is liberated from bondage to darkness.

The rub, of course, is that we humans, even we so-called faithful ones, are hesitant to give ourselves away quite so fully, to dissolve or dissipate quite so completely. We like to hold back a little or to cluster with like-minded people so that we can compliment one another on our saltiness and brightness without the effort of salting or lighting anything.

Here in the United States at least, we who call ourselves Christian have for some time tended to cluster our salt and concentrate our light to the exclusion of others and to the benefit of none. Trading humility for hubris, we have salted our culture well nigh to death with notions utterly foreign to the Sermon on the Mount. We speak of Christian values, Christian policies, Christian economics, Christian candidates, Christian plumbers, Christian Internet plans, and even Christian hookup sites. We lament being persecuted Christians, overlooked Christians, insulted and mocked Christians, even Christians deprived of the phrase "Merry Christmas," too good for this world.

Called simply to bear the savor of our Savior, we bear instead the bitterness of our better-ness. Too much salt is thrown out and trampled underfoot—along with the food it has tainted.

Is it any wonder that the ranks of the nones are filled out by the dones—those who have experienced the church and want nothing more to do with it? Better, it seems, to chew on a life less savory than to risk the nauseating experience of swallowing nothing but salt.

In the same way, we too often hide our light—or at least contain its glow—under a bushel basket, fearful that letting it shine farther might make it less bright in our immediate vicinity. It is as though there are corners of God’s world unworthy of the illumination they would know if we let our light be placed on a lamp stand rather than under the security of a basket. We should not be surprised that many would rather stand with others in the darkness than be cursed by light that shines only on some.

Ultimately, to be salt and light, to be used by God as God intends, is to dissolve and to dissipate, and in the process to flavor and enlighten. There is no partial dissolution, no limited dissipation. To be salt and light is to live the old hymn that says, “I surrender all.”

There remains only this hitch: the realization that this dissolving and dissipating is best known by another name—dying. Dying to control, dying to security, dying to self. That in turn is the shortest route—the only route—to resurrection.

And so Paul proclaims to the Corinthians and to us that he will know nothing “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Not wisdom, not lofty words, neither heaped-up salt nor basket-bound light—but Christ crucified, drawing behind those who would bear the cross, letting their light shine, dying to live.