

ALL ARE WELCOME IN THIS PLACE – SUNDAY THREE

Cross of Glory Lutheran Church

Let's Build a Place that Is Well Lit

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. 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."¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."¹⁵ Neither do people 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."¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

As we think about building a new sanctuary here at Cross of Glory, one thing we really need to think about is the lighting. People don't want to sit in a church that is dimly lit and where it is nearly impossible to read the words of the hymns or see the pastor. People also don't want to sit in a church that is so bright they need to pull out their sunglasses in order not to hurt their eyes. Lighting is something you really need to get right. It's very important. In our Gospel today, Jesus shows us that we also really need to think about the spiritual lighting of our church. This is the light that shines forth from the lives of our members. Even more than with fancy light fixtures and energy efficient light bulbs, a church reaches out to its community by being well lit spiritually.

We aren't told in our reading who is speaking these words, but I'm sure you are aware that these are words of Jesus. They are taken from longer section of Matthew's gospel that is often called the Sermon on the Mount. This is a sermon that Jesus preached to a specific audience – his disciples. We know that every section of Scripture is important and worthy of attention. But when we realize that these are words of Jesus himself and they are spoken specifically with us in mind, as Jesus' followers, it really causes us to sit at the edge of our seat and pay attention to what is being said. What message does Jesus speak to our hearts this morning?

His message is simple. He begins by saying, *"You are the salt of the earth."* You've heard that expression before: "salt of the earth." Nowadays, we use that expression to speak of humble, unpretentious, hard-working kind of people. But what did this phrase mean in the context of life in first century Palestine? Salt had a number of different uses back then. For one, it was used as a seasoning. This is how we are most familiar with salt today. I'm sure there are people sitting here today who feel that no meal is complete if there isn't a salt shaker near at hand to give it a little extra flavor. Another use of salt in those day was as a preservative. Of course, they couldn't place their meat in the freezer like we do today. So they salted their meat to keep it from spoiling. As Jews, Jesus' disciples would have also been familiar with salt's use in sacrifices at the temple. No offering could be given to God if it was not first salted. I thought a lot about which use of salt Jesus was referring to in his words to the disciples and came to the conclusion that it probably includes all of them. Whether it was in a seasoning, as a preservative, or being used ceremonially at the temple, salt was seen as a necessary part of existence. In a similar way, Jesus' followers are a necessary part of the earth's existence. Just think of it...Jesus entrusted his Word to his disciples. He gave them the command to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Without those disciples, there would be no way for the people of the world to know about the good news of their Savior Jesus.

As Christians, we provide a similar necessary service for the world today. As we are reminded in the book of Romans, how could people ever know about their Savior if no one ever told them? As we speak the Word of God in this world and live according to that Word, we are providing the salt that it desperately needs. But this is not always what happens, is it? Jesus warned his disciples: *"But if 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?"* If Christians are not actively witnessing their faith and practicing what they preach, they become salt that is no longer salty. Think of it: how do you fill this world's need to hear the gospel, if your words and your life are no different than those of the unbelievers living around you. Perhaps you've heard it said before: You might be the only Bible people get to read. In other words, if they are not hearing the message from you or seeing it in the way you live your life, they may never know. You have become salt that has lost its saltiness.

Jesus speaks a similar admonition when he uses another picture for his disciples. He tells them: “*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.*”¹⁵ *Neither do people 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.*” The Word that Jesus has entrusted to us is the light that this world needs to see. But what happens if we place that light under a bowl? That seems like kind of a silly question doesn’t it? Who would place a light under a bowl? There is a Bible story where that actually happened. Do you remember when Gideon and his army were planning a sneak attack on the Midianites? Gideon had each of his men hold a torch under a jar. At his signal, they smashed their jars and surrounded the enemy with light. This surprise cause the Midianites to flee in terror. As Christians, however, we are not planning a sneak attack on our friends, neighbors or family members. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to them that we follow Christ and that his Word is the most important thing in our lives. This would be like placing our lamp under a bowl. I think there is another admonition in Jesus’ words as well. Who does he say is able to see the light when it is placed on a lamp stand? It’s for everyone in the house. Our light is to shine for all to see. At times, we are tempted to pick and choose for whom we will let our light shine. We’ll be real open about our Christianity with one group of people, but quick hide it under the bowl when we are with a different group of people. Again, we aren’t helping anyone when we do this.

So far, this message has been kind of a downer. We realize that we aren’t living up to Jesus’ standard for us as the salt of the earth and light of the world. So how is that we can find something encouraging and uplifting in Jesus’ words to us this morning? I think we can find encouragement in one little word that Jesus’ speaks twice in these verses. It’s only three letters long. The word is “are.” That doesn’t seem like a very encouraging word when you take it by itself. But it becomes encouraging when you hear Jesus say it in this context: “*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.*” With that Word, Jesus is telling his disciples and us that we don’t need to work to become salt and light. By his grace, we already are salt and light. He made us the light of the world when he caused the light of his love to shine in our hearts. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians: “*For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*” Through Jesus, God no longer sees the darkness of our sins, he sees the light of Christ shining in us. That is what forgiveness means. What a wonderful and undeserved blessing that God would take our dull and dark life of sin and give us the spice of his love and the light of his Son.

When we think of the wonderful transformation that has taken place in our hearts, it isn’t hard to think of how we will show that transformation to others. We simply need to be what God has already made us—his dear children. This means taking time to listen to his Word and be filled with the knowledge of our Savior. It also means putting that knowledge to good use by living according to the Word and leaving the sinful deeds of darkness behind us. When we live as salt and light in this world, a wonderful thing happens: our God is glorified. As Jesus said, “*Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*” The ultimate goal of our lives is to bring praise to the One who loved us and saved us. An excellent way to praise him is to tell his name to others and share his love with them.

As we live for Christ and not ourselves, people take notice. It’s not a common thing to see someone show genuine humility and unselfishness in this world. But that is what the light of Christ is all about. It’s not a common thing to hear someone speak of absolute truth and be convinced that the Bible is God’s Word and not just an old book like any other. As we fill our lives with these kind of uncommon acts and words, we are bringing praise to our God and giving the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work through us and change someone else’s life. Each one of us can make a difference as the salt and light of the earth.

It’s even greater when we work together to share Christ with those around us. One candle can light up a room. Many candles can make it shine brightly. This is the kind of spiritual lighting that can make our church truly beautiful.

Amen.