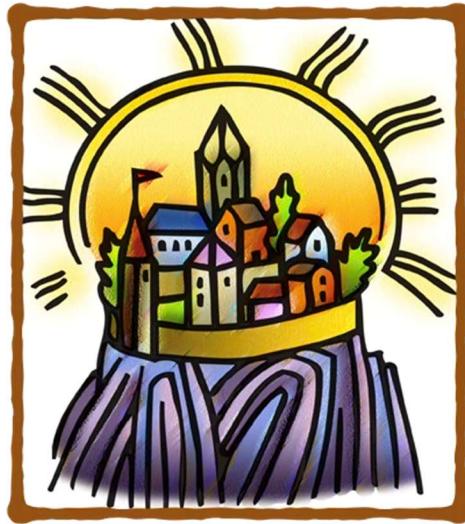


You ARE Salt and Light!

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
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Matthew 5:13-20

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*



For most of her adult life, the author Anne Rice was an atheist. She became famous as the author of a number of gothic novels about vampires and witches. After nearly 40 years of denying God, Rice returned to the Catholic Church of her youth. She produced two novels about Jesus and wrote an autobiography that described her journey back to Christ, along with her decision to become a Christian. But then, 12 years later, Rice announced that she had *"quit being a Christian."* Yes, she was done with the church. She said that she wasn't leaving Christ. Her faith in him remained central to her life. What she was abandoning was the church. She had come to see it as a *"quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous group."* Yes, Christian churches can sometimes be like that. So, we can understand why people wouldn't want to join one.

The challenge for us in the church is to focus on being *"the salt of the earth"* and *"the light of the world."* Jesus says that when we act as salt and light, people will see our good works, and they will give glory to our Father in heaven. Let's take a look at what it means to be salty and bright!

What do we know about salt? We all know that salt enhances the flavor of food. Salt is used and has been used as a preservative. Salt doesn't exist for itself but affects and transforms other elements. It melts ice. Jesus tells his disciples that they are not to exist only for themselves. Their mission is to reveal God's kingdom on earth. They are the salt that transforms the status quo. They are the salt that envisions another way of being in the world. They are to make an impact in a world dominated by Roman rule. His followers were to be missional participants who transform the injustices in society. Jesus is building on the beatitudes that he preached about at the beginning of his *Sermon on the Mount.*

In addition, there is one more dimension to salt that I learned about this past week. Salt was frequently used as a metaphor for wisdom, particularly in ancient Jewish and early Christian contexts. The scriptures often refer to having "salt" in one's speech, conversation that is filled with wisdom, grace, and thoughtfulness. Salt also symbolizes an everlasting *covenant* with God. A *"covenant of salt"* found is mentioned in Numbers 18:19. It represents loyalty and incorruptibility. And Jesus used salt to stand for the impact his followers are to have on the world. This impact implies a mixture of wisdom, purity, and active, positive influence on others.

The early church used salt in three rites: 1) Before a baptism, salt was blessed with an exorcism. A pinch of salt was put in the mouths of baptismal candidates. We don't do this today. Instead, we ask the candidate or the parents, the sponsors, and those gathered to renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God; to renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God, and to renounce the ways of sin that draw us from God. 2) Salt was used in the reconsecration of an altar. Salt was exorcized, blessed, and mixed with ashes, water and wine. The resulting paste was used to make the mortar with which the altar was resealed. 3) And finally, salt was used to bless holy water. It was added to the baptismal water in remembrance of the blessed salt scattered over the water by the prophet Elisha to invoke the protective powers of salt and water to *"drive away the power of evil."* Some churches still do this today. So essentially, salt is seen as a necessary element that makes life better. It honors commitments and mirrors the role of wisdom in one's life. As followers of Christ, we are not to lose that wisdom. In your baptism, you ARE salt.

Next, what do we know about light? Light illuminates the darkness. Light enables us to see; not only with our eyes, but with our hearts. Light is the kind of energy that gives things color. Light helps plants grow. Light provides solar power for electricity. Like light, disciples as a gathered community have the overarching purpose of being the mirror that refracts God's light so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy. Light is also used in baptism. A candle is lit and the pastor says, *"Let your light shine before that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven."*

Matthew's community was to be a light in the first century. Likewise, the church is to be a light among our communities today. The light of a struggling congregation, even if small and dim, can illuminate someone's life. We might ask ourselves, *"Am I a person who bears the light of Christ—a light that glows with humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity and peace?"* It doesn't mean we must follow the law perfectly. God doesn't expect us to. But we are to do the best we can. We ARE the light in a troubled world. So, allow Christ to shine through you. As Christians, our mission is to be like Christ: To bring light into darkness. There are so many people who are attracted to the light of Christ. We can help guide them. But first our churches need to be places of welcome instead of rejection. They must be grace filled instead of judgment, humility instead of arrogance, gentleness instead of violence, unity instead of division, and light instead of darkness. Christians emit light when they are loving.

We wonder why people, especially young people don't go to church. We may wonder why people who are drawn to Jesus, like Anne Rice, decide to leave their church. Chances are they encountered people who hurt them, insulted them, or discriminated against them. When people are not focused on being salt and light, they tend to look around and see darkness in the world. They become anti-this and anti-that. They look at problems as roadblocks instead of challenges to be solved. They can get stuck in their ways, unable to accept new ideas. And they can become off-putting to people who are different from them.

For example, when asked why he appeared to reject being a Christian, Mahatma Gandhi once said, *"Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."* Why did Gandhi feel this way? It had nothing to do with theology, and everything to do with personal experience. When he was a young man practicing

law in South Africa, he was attracted to the Christian faith. He studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. He explored the idea of becoming a Christian. One day, he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the church, a white church elder blocked his way. *"Where do you think you're going?"* the man asked. Gandhi replied, *"I'd like to attend worship here."* The church elder snarled at him, *"There's no room for [blacks] in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."* From that moment on, Gandhi resolved to adopt what was good in Christianity, but never to become a Christian if it meant being part of a church. And yet today, we see churches that know how to shine Christ's light and love in the world.

In Minneapolis, many people of faith are acting as Christ's salt and light for immigrants in their city. They are actively resisting aggressive ICE enforcement actions. They provide sanctuary and support with resources for those in need. This *"theology of showing up"* includes volunteers who escort, drive, and offer mutual aid to protect and support immigrant communities during times of fear and crisis. Here are some key ways they are serving: Members of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church and others who alert neighbors to ICE presence by blowing whistles and honking. They follow agents to prevent detentions and drive immigrants to work for safety. Residents have created networks that have raised over \$300,000 to assist with rent, food, and healthcare for immigrant families. Around 100 faith leaders (pastors, rabbis, imams) have engaged in peaceful civil disobedience to demand an end to the *"reign of fear"* and to protect families. Local communities are upholding Minnesota's reputation for hospitality, supporting Somali, Hmong, and Latino populations. Others are walking alongside immigrants, offering bilingual services, and holding vigils that provide comfort in neighborhoods affected by fear. This commitment, driven by faith, sees this work as a *"holy"* imperative to support the marginalized.

For me, the care for the alien among us is not a political issue. It is a humane issue. The bottom line is that Jesus works his light and love through us, the church. Had the church Anne Rice attended and the church Mahatma Gandhi attempted to attend remembered their mission was to be salt and light, Rice and Gandhi would not have left them.

Furthermore, God empowers us, people of faith, to do what we can with the tools and gifts God has given us to spread love to those, whoever they may be. Remember You ARE the salt of the earth poured out for others. You ARE the light of the world beaming God's love into the world.

In Jesus' name, amen.