

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

“You are salt and light”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In today’s gospel, Jesus calls his listeners “salt” and “light,” saying, “*You are the salt of the earth*” and “*You are the light of the world.*” These ancient words continue to describe a “way of being” for Jesus’ followers – two complementary ways of being a Christian in this world.

To be called the “salt of the earth” describes our very existence as children of this planet and our kinship with every other human being. We walk this earth and partake of food seasoned with a bit of salt. Jesus is asking us to be humble and “down to earth”; he is asking us to be genuine in our relationships with others.

All of us have met people who, though they may be wealthy or powerful, or gifted intellectually or artistically, are also humble and genuine in their relationships with others. Jesus became truly human, sharing in our earthy saltiness, so that we might experience our humanity anew. Jesus calls his followers to be the “salt of the earth” meeting people just as he did – in their joys and in their human sufferings.

In contrast, to be called the “light of the world” describes our very existence as children of God. Though we are human and tethered to this planet, each of us has been created in God’s image so that we might know God. We have been created to radiate the divine light of God’s Word, the Christ, illuminating the darkness of this world.

In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “*I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life*” (Jn. 8:12). Like people who are genuine in their “saltiness,” we have also met people who, though they may be facing challenge, suffering, or brokenness, outwardly continue to radiate the light of hope and strength, casting out fear and darkness. Jesus is inviting us to be his light in the world.

We have all heard the words of today’s gospel spoken to the newly baptized, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*” As you grow into baptism through faith Christ’s light will become stronger in you over a lifetime.

Yet what does Jesus mean when he says, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.*” The law that Jesus came to fulfill is God’s love for the weak, and God’s desire to be known in weakness. By calling us salt and light Jesus is

calling us to become what he was for others: *“Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life.”* To follow Jesus is to allow him to embody your humanity with his light as you live for others.

Paul wrote about this to the Corinthians. Before coming to Corinth, Paul had visited Athens, where he spoke about God in purely philosophical terms to a learned Greek audience (Acts 17). It seems Paul decided to never do that again. Instead, Paul tells us that in Corinth he spoke in the plainest terms of Christ crucified, and of the foolishness and weakness of the cross.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”* Paul came to Corinth in weakness, speaking in “fear and trembling.” Paul’s down to earth preaching was convincing because he lived the weakness and foolishness of the cross, and people could see in him its power, salt and light. Paul, a man who had relied upon physical and legal force to persecute and arrest Christians, had been encountered by the living Christ, crucified and raised. Encountered by Jesus, Paul became aware of his own weakness, and the power of Jesus’ cross and forgiveness. What Paul wrote has remained true: the world cannot teach the wisdom of God, and human wisdom cannot search out the grace of God.

When Paul came to Corinth speaking in fear, it was not fear of punishment, but rather, an awesome reverence and respect for God that leads to reverence and respect for fellow human beings. To know we are poor in spirit, to have experienced our own human weakness, makes us receptive not only to God’s grace, but also to our neighbor in need. To live as salt and as light for others means realizing that whatever power, wealth and insight I may possess is a gift I have been given to use for my neighbor.

Today’s reading from Isaiah is very honest about the ways we seek to bargain with God. We say to God, “I have fasted, I have fulfilled the law, why haven’t you blessed me?” Our words of disillusionment betray our selfishness before God. Isaiah reminds us that God doesn’t want our fasting and suffering; rather, God desires our loving service toward our neighbor. Isaiah writes, *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”*

When Jesus says he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law, he is, like Isaiah, encouraging us to live with justice for others. Jesus is saying that we must be salt and light, genuinely living for others, radiating light that gives hope to those in need.

Throughout the week people in need come to this church. People come seeking to be fed from the Lord's table, people come to serve and to share with others. Some may not come on Sunday, but come seeking food or a meal at the Soup Kitchen; others come seeking safety, clothing and assistance. I am often here when someone rings the bell or knocks on the door seeking help because the world will not or cannot help them. Recently, someone came seeking help. He could not make ends meet for his family and his children. He was employed and worked daily, but it was not enough. He shared photos of his family with me and then burst into tears, saying, "I am afraid." This is the fear and trembling of Paul in Corinth. It is the knowledge of our own weakness and utter dependence upon God's grace. Throughout the week, people in need and fear come to this holy place seeking God's strength, grace and love.

Christians are to respond to others, not with a philosophy, a theology, or a creed, but as humble salt and radiant light. We are to be the living presence of Jesus for the least of these, for those in need of food, shelter, clothing – for those in need of light in the darkness. Live as a stranger in this world, so that you might help the stranger in your midst. This is what it means to fulfill the law. Fulfilling the law is not for my benefit, it is for the benefit of others.

Your neighbor lives in fear and trembling. When you help them, God is strengthening them, and through you, saying, "*Here I am.*"

Live as salt and light *so others may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

*You are salt and light. Amen.*