

Bitter Salt
February 8, 2026 Sermon
by the Rev. Dr. Sheldon Steen

Our second scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew 5:13-20. Let us listen that this might be for us God's word.

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

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 lamp stand, 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 the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Of course, you know, whenever I read this text about being the light of the world and not hiding the light under a bushel basket, I'm sure like many of you, your brain immediately goes to “This Little of Mine,” right? Anybody else singing that in your head as we go through there? Yeah, of course. I mean it's a wonderful little tune that we teach to kids and that especially the kids love, you know, hide it under a bushel? No! It's the best. It's super fun. But you know growing up I at a certain point I came to understand and believe that what it meant to shine our light and to not hide it under a bushel basket had something to do with trying to get other people to believe in Jesus. Right?

That what it meant to shine my light was to do things, like, for instance, in high school, I was a part of a group of students who every morning we would gather in front of the flag pole outside of school. We would hold hands around the flag pole, and we would pray as this kind of light shining opportunity so that other students would walk up, and they would see us praying, and... I don't know what we thought it was going to accomplish, but maybe in some way they would be compelled to recognize and feel some kind of

call and some kind of tug on their hearts. I think it's something that still goes on every year during the school year. There's one day called "See you at the pole" day, where they encourage students who have come to gather around the flag pole and pray together. And I don't mean to criticize that. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with that.

But again, the whole idea that we had was that we were there to shine our lights to help get people to believe in Jesus. That that was the entire goal was because we now believed in Jesus, we were saved, right? This is the language that we use. We were saved, but just about everybody else was lost, and they needed to accept Jesus into their hearts as we had done.

Some of us, like me, who were racked with the fear of hell and guilt and all sorts of shame, gave our lives to Jesus a lot over and over and over again. Every time there was any kind of altar call or invitation, I would do it again just in case, even though I had already done it a dozen times. I didn't want to take any chances here. I'm really trying to avoid this hell thing. But it's strange.

Go read through the whole sermon on the mount. You won't find a single command of Jesus for those who were gathered there for them to believe in him. He says to them, you are the light of the world. He doesn't say you can eventually become the light of the world. He doesn't say you are the light of the world *if...* or you are the salt of the earth *if*. He says it's who we are right now. He doesn't seem to have this hang up that so many of us do that if people don't believe exactly the right and proper things that they are somehow outside of God's love and outside of God's grace.

It might sound a little bit threatening at certain points because he says if salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. The thing about salt though is we know it can't actually lose its saltiness. It's impossible. Salt on its own will always remain salt. We can dilute it in water and it can make it appear less salty. But that salt can also always be salvaged. It can always be restored. It can be salt again, not diluted by whatever surrounds it.

We so often think that we have to earn something when it comes to God's love and God's favor. We so often think we have to be a certain way to be good enough to believe the right things and then maybe we can become the salt of the earth. Then maybe we can be the light of the world. Then maybe we can get others to believe in Jesus. But notice again, there is no language about belief here. Rather, he says, he says, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven."

For Jesus, it's all about what we do with our lives. It's not simply about what we think or what we believe. And obviously, what we believe matters. I don't want to suggest that it doesn't. If we believe, in other words, that most of humanity is hopelessly fallen and destined for hell, that's going to influence the way that we treat other people. If we believe that some people are possessed by evil—that they are possessed by demons, and they are in league with the devil, as you will often hear in so much of the rhetoric that comes from Christian pulpits—that's going to influence how we treat other people, the way we relate to one another; whether or not we think they are deserving of the kind of mercy and compassion to which Jesus calls us all throughout his teaching, all throughout his life, especially here in the sermon on the mount.

He says it's not simply about what we believe. It's about what we do. It's about the way we live and move in the world. And again, he says it is who you already are. So often, it is we who put up these blocks between us and our true nature, that is, the way that God truly sees us. It is we who hold ourselves back from being as loving and gracious and merciful as God calls us to be. Because if we can't accept that we are already light and salt, how can we ever see that in someone else? If we can't believe and understand and recognize that God is already for us, exactly as we are, how could we ever believe that God is for other people as well?

So what does it mean for us to be salt and light? What does it mean to actually embody this in the world? Well, I think it looks a lot like what Isaiah said. Again, we love to keep those prophets in this nice little box where all they're doing is pointing to Jesus and proving us right about him being the son of God. We love those prophets because they're safe. We love all the stories and the prophecies from Isaiah and Jeremiah that we can connect particularly to the Christmas story or the Easter story because they make us feel good about what we believe.

I don't know how you can read this text from Isaiah and think it's just about belief. In other words, Isaiah states very clearly that the fast that God desires is a fast in which we loosen the bonds of injustice. We undo the straps of the yoke. We let the oppressed go free and break every single yoke that there is. This is not a spiritual teaching in the sense that it matters just what you have in your heart. It has everything to do with the world that we are actively building, the world that we choose to be a part of—what Jesus referred to, again, as the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

God through Isaiah says, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger," boy, we love doing that, don't we, "the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day."

Who we are is deeply connected to who those around us are—the way we see one another, the way we treat one another. God and Jesus are always inviting us to recognize that our destinies are mutually intertwined, that there is no separation between me and my neighbor. There is no separation between me and those I would otherwise call my enemy. Jesus breaks down all of those divisions. In Ephesians, the author there says that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. It seems that almost all I see from Christians today is our attempts to rebuild those walls of hostility to say these are the people who belong and everyone else does not.

And not only do they not belong, they may not even be worthy of my compassion or my empathy. Empathy, in certain circles, has become a toxic word. It is truly wild. There's literally a rather popular Christian book among certain segments of Christians called "toxic empathy." This concern that if we care too deeply about the plight of other people that we will be led in all sorts of dangerous directions. And of course those directions are things, like Marxism and communism and, you know, the the traditional American bogeymen, right? All of the things that we love to say if we care about our neighbor will end up in these terrible places.

Jesus rather invites us back, time and time again, to let go of concern for ourselves and to care only for the needs of our neighbors. Not that we have to suffer or feel terrible about who we are and what we have and the gifts that we have received, but this deep recognition that whatever goodness we have experienced is only meant to be shared. It is only meant to be spread throughout the world.

What good is it to be the light of the world if we keep it under a bushel? If we keep it under this safe, secure enclosure where all that matters is what I believe and what's in my own little heart. Everything else is just a bonus. It's just extra. Again, justice—concern for justice—is an optional add-on to faith rather than, as Isaiah and Jesus constantly point out to us, that it is faith itself. Or as James said, faith without works is dead. He says, "Oh, you believe? Great. That means nothing if you turn your back on your neighbor who is hungry. It means nothing if you turn your back on your neighbor who is facing deportation. It means nothing if you turn your back on your LGBTQ neighbor who has been told that they don't matter, as their rights are being consistently eroded. These things mean nothing if we don't put flesh on them. Whatever we believe means absolutely nothing if we don't live it in the world in the way that we treat one another.

Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." We're used to thinking of the scribes and Pharisees as the bad guys. Jesus say we're falling short even of them. Remember, his

harshest words were always reserved for those who considered themselves righteous, for those who considered themselves religious and holy and set apart and special.

His kindest words, his most compassionate words were always for those who were on the outside. This is where we are being called. This is how we are being called to live our lives as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are just teeny tiny little lights pointing to the larger light that is Jesus. He is the true light of the world. You and I can't do that on our own.

But we are not following Christ if we are only concerned about ourselves, our own beliefs, our own security, our own comfort. We are not following Christ if we do not go out into the world and embody this kind of lived experience, and embody the kind of love that Christ embodied himself.

So friends, please hear this good news. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world, exactly as you are. There is not a thing you need to do to change that, except to begin to live into it. It is not an identity we can actually lose. It never goes away. The only thing keeping us from doing it is us. The only thing keeping us from following Christ, the true light of the world, is ourselves.

So, let us go live as that light. Let us go live as that salt. So that as Isaiah called us, we can loosen the bonds of injustice and break the yoke of oppression. To God who protects us from nothing yet sustains us in all things be all glory and honor now and in the world to come. Amen.