

Epiphany 5, February 8, 2026
St. Andrew's Church, Kitchener

Holy Communion/Eucharist, 8:00 a.m./10:00 a.m.

Revised Common Lectionary (Yr. A, Pr. 5): **Matthew 5:13-20**
Preacher: Gerry Mueller

It can be tempting for a preacher to take a Gospel lesson like the one we just heard and turn it into "Rules." "Do **this**, and God will reward you," or, "Don't do **that**, or God will get you." But that suggests Christianity is about following rules to please God and earning salvation. Christianity is the very opposite; it claims salvation cannot be earned, no matter how diligently we follow rules. It is a way of being, a way of life, which today's Gospel illustrates well. But we need to look at it **in context**.

Consider the young Christian church a little more than 1900 years ago. In about fifty years after the events themselves stories about Jesus had spread throughout the Mediterranean world. His followers had preached and baptised, as they had been **commanded**. By the eighties of the 1st century there were many groups calling themselves Christians; we'd call them local churches.

But they had no **authoritative** scriptures. There were copies of Paul's letters, also of some other letters we call the pastoral epistles, and the Gospel of Mark. There were stories **about** Jesus, mostly oral, a few written down, and **likely** a written collection of only sayings of Jesus with no context (now called Q). Not every local church had all these, and there were different versions.

Story telling and hand-copying do not maintain the uniformity we take for granted.

Matthew's Gospel was written about then, as **one** attempt to collect what was known about the life and teachings of Jesus. The writer is more **editor** of existing material than author. He is not writing biography, but **theology**. He wants to **show** that Jesus **is** the Messiah of Jewish prophecy, and show how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the essential **work** of the Messiah. He also wants to show that the church is the true and new **Israel**, called to live a new and higher righteousness, **radically** different from Jewish law.

The **Sermon on the Mount** is Matthew's centrepiece, the **essential** teachings of Jesus in one sermon on the Christian life. Its radical qualities, newness and freshness compared to Jewish law, make it **certain** these are the words of Jesus. The Sermon probably was preached to a small(ish) number of disciples, but in Matthew's theology it is addressed to the **whole** church. Today's lesson comes immediately after Jesus' new law, the **Beatitudes**, as a description of what Jesus' followers are to **be**. Jesus speaks to his **disciples**; Matthew, guided by the Holy Spirit, speaks to the **church** of his and every age.

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.

Note this is a **description**! Jesus says his followers **are** the salt of the earth, **not** they are **to be** salt of the earth. It's a strange description, but meaningful to his listeners. In our time salt is cheap, we notice it only when there is too much or too little in our food (and these days on our roads!). Then salt was precious as the only practical way of **preserving** food, and a small bag of salt was worth a person's life. But the **value** comes from salt's **use** as a preservative. For the church to be the salt of the earth means it is to **preserve** the world. The church does not exist for itself, but to **save** the world for God.

If salt were too lose its taste (its saltiness!) it is useless, and is thrown out. If the church becomes unable to be the salvation of the world, perverts the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, it becomes **useless**, fit only to be thrown out and trampled by the changing religious fads of the world.

But there is **promise**. Salt is stable and remains salt. Jesus is stating an absurdity and his listeners know it - salt does not lose its flavour. **True** followers of Jesus cannot lose their function of preserving the world. The true church will **continue**, the Gospel cannot be changed. This is the **promise** of God.

And there is **hope**. Salt is effective in **small** quantities, out of proportion to amount. A pinch preserves **lots** of food. So it is with the small group of disciples, or the small churches to whom Matthew is writing. Their effect on the world is out of all **proportion**, the

world will be preserved for God by these few faithful people, hardly noticeable in the great pagan world. And that hope is offered **today**, with Christians once again a minority. The church may be small, its numbers may be shrinking, but that is no reason to despair, or worse to give up and become salt without taste. No, the **faithful** church goes on, to be the pinch of salt that preserves the world for God.

And there is also **warning**. Salt alone is useless, it is only useful when it is **used** in food. So it is with disciples of Jesus. The church is in the **world, seasoning** the world, **preserving** the world. That is as true in our time as it was in the time of Jesus or Matthew. The church cannot listen to those who tell it to stick to **religion**, and leave the business of the world alone. The church's business **is** the world, and only by remaining a critical voice, judging and correcting the world by the standards of the **Gospel**, is the church acting as salt **for the world**.

You are the light of the world.

The disciples and the church are still **described** in simple terms. Their function is to light up the world. The rabbis of Jesus' time frequently spoke of God, or Israel, or the Law, as the light of the world. Jesus tells his followers **they** are the light of the world. They are the presence of God, the new Israel, the new law.

Again, the image is of something small being **effective** out of **proportion**. Lights in Jesus' time were the sun, moon, and stars, or oil lamps and fires. All of these are small relative to the light they give. And so the church, **small** as it is, lights up the **world**. Even today, it **is** the light of the world; we need to remember that when we despair of the church's **relevance**.

A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Here Jesus speaks **ironically**, **sarcastically**. Who builds a city on a **hill**, and then **hides** it? Or who lights a **lamp**, and immediately **covers** it so that no light can escape. Cities are build on hills to be visible, and lamps are lit to give light in houses.

So it is with the disciples and the church. They are **called** to be visible, in the open, available. Through them Jesus' words are public, open, with no **hidden** secrets, no **secrets** of salvation. This openness and visibility is the very **nature** of the church. It is like the lamp on a stand illuminating the whole house. The church is the light for the entire world.

Remember this, today, when the church has become seemingly **irrelevant**, no longer a respected moral voice. There is pressure to be hidden, private, like a hidden city, like a covered light. Jesus tells us that this is not what we **are**. Light illuminates the dark, and the church lights the darkness of the world.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is the **climax** of the passage; the **reason** the church **exists**. It exists not for its glory, or the **benefit** of members. Jesus is not teaching his disciples for their good, or even for the good of others. Good works are not for **earning salvation**, or for benefit to someone else. No, the only reason for good works is that those observing them will thereby **see and glorify** God. This is the **mission** of the church. It is not to work for its own glory, or for the good of its members or others. The church exists to lead **all** people to a vision of God, and to the **glorifying** of God. And that is the **only** and **ultimate** reason for the church.

Salt of the earth. Light of the world. **Descriptions** of disciples, the church, us. That may feel like awesome **responsibility**. How can you and I preserve the world the way salt preserves food? How can you and I light up the world the way a lamp lights up a house? And all of this only so that others will find God and glorify God. But **remember again**, Jesus is not **commanding** us, he is **describing** us. We are not to **try** to be salt, we **are** salt. We are not to **try** to be light, we **are** light. The ability and strength to be these things come **not** from us, they come from **God**.

If we have any **responsibility**, it is to act like salt that is salty, and light that is not covered. That means being **in** the world and **of** the world, so that the world will be preserved by our **presence**. That means being in the open, **visible**, in order that the world can be illuminated by us. We do not **do** the preserving, and we do not **do** the lighting. The power of Christ works **through** us to preserve the world, and the light of Christ shines **through** us to light the dark.

It is a **serious** task, especially when we **recognize** that it is not **salt** that is important, but the **world** that is being saved. It is not the **light** that is important, but the **world** that is being illuminated. It is not the **church** or **disciples** that are important, but the **salvation** of those who **see** God and **glorify** God because of the church or the disciples. We are not advertising **neon signs** for God, we are **altar candles**. If the light is to burn, we must feed it with our own faithfulness and prayer. And, if necessary, the candles may need to burn out for Christ!