

“Salt Life”

Matthew 5:13-20

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There's a clothing and apparel brand that is wildly popular, especially close to the oceans, that I'm sure most of you are familiar with called Salt Life. Whether you've seen the shirts, hats, or the window stickers (like the one on the Killion car), the brand is all over the place. One of their slogans that you can find on their products is “Live salty.” Their goal is to bring people and the oceans together, giving them the opportunity to experience what they would call “the salt life.” Whether they intended it or not, the spirit of that is all about enjoying God's gracious gift of creation and caring for it at the same time. Living one's life to the fullest and experiencing the fun, sun, and waves of the ocean, though, is not the same as being the salt of the earth, as the Lord calls His disciples in our text this morning.

If you are going to live “the salt life” as those who are the salt of the earth, you should first understand a little more about what salt is. Salt is more than just a simple seasoning to make food taste better. It is indeed that, and is therefore the enemy of many a cardiologist. But it has been used for millennia as a preservative. It fortifies what it preserves to extend its life almost endlessly. But if salt ceases to be salty, then its ability to preserve anything or make food palatable ceases as well. So, if you are the salt of the earth, then you are the ones who preserve it, right? You should love and care for the earth and stop carbon emissions and save the polar bears and all the other “climate change” slogans. Not so fast... You should indeed care for the creation, but there is so much more at play here.

Let's bring in the other imagery Jesus uses in our Gospel lesson. Jesus also says, “You are the light of the world.” The Lord bids you to shine in this fallen world, to bring forth good works that flow from faith to show the world that you are justified by His grace. But again, those works themselves are not what make you light, just as your caring for the creation is not what makes you salt. The darkness of this world constantly overshadows the light that shines through those in the faith, if one looks only on the surface. This sinful world covers it with a basket and your sinful flesh lets it. It wants to take away the saltiness and douse the lamps that your faith brings forth in the world. And very often it succeeds. People fall from the faith, and they are cast out into the road and trampled underfoot because their saltiness is no more and their light fails to shine.

And when Christians allow themselves to look to their own works as the source of light and the means of preservation for their faith, they weaken themselves and their faith because they are trying to preserve with something that is only like salt. Works righteousness looks like salt, but it has no flavor. It has no power to preserve and sustain the wearied soul because all it can do is weary it even more in the face of continual failure to please God. Salt that is no longer salt only spoils that to which it is applied. If you take salt that has gone bad (its chemical properties have leached out of it) and use it to preserve meat or any other food, it won't do any preserving. It will turn it into a rotten chunk that deserves only the garbage. Self-reliance and self-righteous works are the bad salt and the basket that hides the light.

If it is up to you and your works, then the promise of eternal life is empty because you have no power within yourself to bring about salvation. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, there were many different offerings prescribed for the people of God. One of those was the grain offering. Leviticus 2:13 says, "You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." The priest would salt the offering in order that it would be pleasing to God, according to the covenant with God. This Old Testament sacrifice seasoned with salt was a foretaste of what Christ would do for the whole world.

Jesus is the salt of the New Testament, and His saltiness makes you acceptable before God just as the salt makes the sacrifice acceptable for the Israelites. He is the pleasing aroma that goes up before Yahweh and He is what pleases God when you do good works. It is He living in you that makes you able to perform good works by the Holy Spirit and thus be salt in the earth and the shining light that bears witness to Him. As those who are in the faith of Jesus Christ, the One who died to redeem the world, you are a city upon a hill and you cannot be hidden. You are there for all the world to see, and it is a part of your life in the faith to shine forth in this world of darkness. But you cannot shine on your own. You cannot season the food for the offering on your own. Jesus alone can do those things, and you can do them because you are His body, baptized into His death and resurrection as adopted sons of the Most High God.

There is no mystery in how you are to live as His holy child. Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." You live by faith in Christ. In your daily vocations, your light shines through your faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself for you. And isn't it the most comforting thing to know that He shines through you

despite your wretchedness—despite the sinful flesh which battles daily to overtake the new man. He gives you the means of providing His saltiness to the world. His means of grace are gifts to all mankind, and the promise contained in those means is the promise that despite being a poor miserable sinner, He has taken the punishment to the cross to forgive you of that miserable state.

By His Holy Word, you “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).” You are the priesthood of all believers that gives the salt to the world, drawing people to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit in and through you, and thus making the offering acceptable before your Lord God in heaven. By the water of baptism, Christ’s Church brings faith through the Word of promise that “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16).” Salvation comes through simple means as a pastor washes the head of a young child, and Christ claims them as His own, drowning the Old Adam that would otherwise hold them in his power. By the body and blood of Jesus—in, with, and under the bread and wine—forgiveness, life, and salvation have been given to all who believe. He is present here to bring His gifts, and as you taste and see that the Lord is good, “you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).”

In the face of a world that is decaying and groaning for the coming of its restoration, the Lord Jesus calls us to be salt and light. But you are not salt and light by what you do. Those things are evidence of your salt and light. Your salt and light is Jesus, who dwells in you by virtue of your baptismal identity. You are salt and light not because you do good works, but because Christ who is the light of the world and the salt that makes you pleasing to God lives within you. And He lives within all of you through His Word and through His sacraments. You taste the saltiness of His love for you when you come to this table and partake of His body and blood that was given for you on the cross of salvation. As the one body of Christ, you show the world that you belong to Him because He has claimed you as His own dear children by what He has done, and not what you have done. He is the One who preserves and sustains all things. He alone is the one who preserves and sustains you in the faith. You are salt and light not because of who you are and what you do, but because of Whose you are and what He has already done.

So, living the “salt life” is not about you and your deeds. Yes, you are called to be a witness to the faith that is given to you by living a life that is pleasing to God. But those salty things only come from the source of your faith, and that is Jesus Christ. Which is why we choose to do as Paul proclaims in our Epistle lesson to “know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).” That is what you proclaim with unending joy, and what you must never cease to proclaim as long as there

is faith in your hearts and breath in your lungs. By His blood, by His suffering and death, you are made righteous in the sight of the Father. According to His salt and light that He brings into the world by His atonement for sin, all have been ransomed, and by faith you have received that gracious gift for His sake alone. Because you are His forgiven and redeemed child, you do not wait for the light to shine in this world, but you look with longing eyes to the salt and light of His holy presence, where you will dwell in everlasting bliss with your Lord and Savior, surrounded by the light of His glory forever. Amen.