

1.28.2018 Septuagesima (Matthew 5:1-16)

We've all heard that old saying about life: It's not how you start that matters, it's how you finish. Sadly, in our society we constantly see examples of famous celebrities, world-class athletes, successful business leaders, and well-known politicians who fail to finish well. We've come to expect this in our culture, but unfortunately many in the Church suffer a similar fate. Certainly, we can all think of evangelists, pastors, priests, or brothers and sisters in Christ who won't be remembered so much for their victories, but for a final, grievous failure. In life, and in the Christian faith, it's not how you start that matters, it's how you finish, and we all want to finish well. We want to be remembered as men and women of God, people who can say with St. Paul, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (2 Timothy 4:7). At our funeral, we want those words to be said about us.

In our second lesson this morning, we heard Jesus say: "*Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*" (Matthew 5:13-16). Those verses from the Sermon on the Mount record the words of Jesus spoken to many who had followed Him for only a few days. These new disciples had no special training, no years of experience, and no contribution to make, but Jesus says to them, and to us, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." By the grace of God, this is how we begin.

As we deny our own will and turn to follow Him, as we seek to do all things by His grace, in His strength, and to His glory, we are the salt that purifies and seasons this world. We are the light of God's truth, the light of God's Word, and the light of God's love burning in the midst of cultural darkness. As disciples of Jesus Christ, this is what we are right now, yet it is important to recognize the very significant "but" at the beginning of this passage. Jesus said, "*Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour,*

*wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men*” (Matthew 5:13). In our culture, and in the Church, we’ve seen examples of people who start out strong, like salt and light they are distinctly different than their surroundings, but if a person fails to finish well, if they lose their savor, they are *“thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.”* In this verse Jesus is clearly warning His first followers, even His Apostles, that this could happen to them, and if it could happen to them, it could certainly happen to us.

So, what does it mean for salt to lose its savor? The thought sounds unusual to us because the salt that we are familiar with is pure sodium chloride. Pure sodium chloride doesn’t lose its savor or decompose. You can put it in water and it will melt, yet it still retains its saltiness, but when we step back into the first century and place ourselves in that region around Galilee, we discover that the salt this group of people used was impure. It was gathered from the shores and marshes of the Dead Sea and it could decompose. When it did, all that was left was a white powder that looked just like salt, but had none of its seasoning effect or transforming power. This decomposed salt could no longer fulfill its intended purpose. It was good for nothing, because there was no good use for this bad salt.

This useless white powder relates a truth to Christians who trust appearance instead of reality. Christians who feel like they are fulfilling their God-given purpose by looking like Christians, or acting very Christian, when they’re around other Christians. Jesus tells us here that, like salt in a beautiful shaker, we may appear to be strong and savory, but the true test for us is not how we look, but what we do. What truly matters is whether or not we are fulfilling our intended purpose. Are we purifying and seasoning the earth, or not? It’s important to recognize in this parable that it’s either one or the other. Jesus tells us that salt either does its job, or it does nothing. Christians, we who are the salt of the earth, are either savory ministers of Christ who love God and our neighbor, we are either the most valuable of all people, or we are of no value at all. This is once again about finishing well. Being the Christian who can say, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* Finishing well is so important for the Christian, because there is no substitute for salt or light. We must fulfill our purpose, because no one and

nothing else can do it for us.

The Christian who fulfills their purpose, who like good salt does what they were created to do, is the Christian who finishes well by using their unique, God-given gifts and abilities for His glory. Authentic disciples of Jesus Christ stand out as people who purify and enhance the flavor of this world. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to our Lord, and for the glory of God, we must influence the world for good, just like salt influences the flavor of the food it seasons. Where there is conflict, we were created to bring peace. Where there is sorrow, we are called to minister in the name of Christ. Where there is hatred, we bring the love of God in Christ, returning good for evil (Matthew 5:44).

Jesus said to His disciples, *“Ye are the salt of the earth... Ye are the light of the world.”* His words declare the truth that in Christ, we are the most valuable gift to this world, *“but”* every day we have a choice to make. Will we choose to fulfill our purpose and be savory ministers of Christ, or will we keep our salt in its shaker? Will we choose to finish well by letting our light so shine that others may see Christ in us, or will we keep the Light of the World hidden under a basket? The choice is yours, and as you know the easy choice in our culture, the choice that will not lead to criticism or rejection, is to keep your Christian salt in its shaker and your light hidden: Go to church on Sunday, do what you feel is your religious duty, and for the rest of the week just blend in. You can choose to do that, but know this, if you do, you’ll miss the joy of fulfilling your purpose and finishing well. You’ll miss the abundant life (John 10:10) that Jesus came to give us. The everlasting life that is found even in this difficult world when we choose to love God by loving our neighbor, when we choose to serve Him by serving others, when we choose to breathe out His love and then breathe it in again.

In life, and in the Christian faith, it’s not how you start that matters, it’s how you finish. By the grace of God, may we finish well. May we be salt and light, culture changing disciples of Jesus Christ that can say on the day He calls us home, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”*