

1.31.2021 Septuagesima (Matthew 5:1-16)

When the Pharisees and scribes asked why Jesus was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, He said to them, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”* (Luke 5:31 NIV). The sick, like Matthew, who was a sinful, despised tax collector, yet became the Apostle who wrote the first book listed in the New Testament; or Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus *“cast out seven demons”* (Mark 16:9), and who came to be known as the “Apostle to the Apostles” because she was the first person to see the Risen Lord, and the first messenger who announced His Resurrection to the Apostles; or Paul, who persecuted the Church, who imprisoned Christians, who stood as the witness at the stoning death of the first Christian martyr, Saul, *“who was also called Paul”* (Acts 13:9), and became the human author of half of the books in the New Testament, the greatest Christian missionary, and a saint who’s led an unimaginable number of people to faith in Christ. We’ve all heard that old saying: It’s not where you start that matters, it’s where you finish, and like the saints who set these examples for us, 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 to His disciples, *“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt hath lost its 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 disciples who had only just begun to follow Him. These new disciples had no special training, no years of experience, and it would seem 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 where 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 who we are, 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 hath lost its 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 disciples, His twelve Apostles, that this could happen to them, and if it could happen to them, it can 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're familiar with doesn't lose its savor or decompose. You can put it in water and it will dissolve, 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 different. It was gathered from the shores and marshes of the Dead Sea, and it could decompose, and 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. 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 effect we have on the world around us. What truly matters is whether or not we are fulfilling our intended, God-given purpose. Are we purifying and seasoning the world, 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 incredibly valuable to this world, 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. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to our Lord, and for the glory of God, authentic disciples of Jesus Christ stand out as people who purify and enhance the flavor of this world, just like salt purifies and enhances the flavor of the food it seasons. Where there is conflict, we were created to make peace (Matthew 5:9). Where there is sorrow, we are called to minister in the name of Christ (Matthew 5:4). Where there is hatred and persecution, we bring the love of God in Christ, returning good for evil (Matthew 5:44).

Jesus said to His disciples, *“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”* His words declare the truth that in Christ, we are an incredibly 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 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 won't lead to criticism or rejection, is to just blend in by keeping your Christian salt in its shaker and your light hidden. You can choose to do that, but know this, if you do, you'll miss the joy of fulfilling your God-given 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 where you start that matters, it's where you finish. By the grace of God, may we, like the saints who've gone before us, 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.”*