

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we are your people, and we wish to be faithful. We gather around to hear the words of Christ once again. We come to hear the wonder, the grace, and the responsibility. We come to learn the lessons and to take it with us to empower our lives for your service and your praise. We come to be the community and then to take the community out into the world. We come to be disciples, to follow, to take heed, to be the goodness of the Kingdom in the world today. We hear seriously the statement of living as salt in the world; we seek to live as light for all to see. We wish to glorify you above all our desires. We live in communion with all the other light-bearers to show this world goodness and love in the face of all our other issues. Help us to never lose our saltiness or to hide that light. You bestow us with gifts and graces that we know and some that we only discover along the way to further the saltiness and light in the world. Let us use these to further the growth of the Kingdom here and everywhere we go.

Holy God, hear these and all our prayers in your name, those spoken, those unspoken, those lifted here, those lifted in our hearts. We entrust ourselves, our lives, our ways of being to you; may we be found faithful in your eyes and in light of your teaching. We pray all these things in the name of the one who guides us still, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Here's a question: how do you judge me as a pastor? How do you know when I really am being a pastor? I would take a guess that it has to do with what I do. Am I keeping up with people? Am I attending to needs as they present themselves? Would I really be a pastor if I just go and sit down? I still have the title. I'm still the pastor. And yet, I'm only

telling you I'm a pastor; don't you believe me when I'm just sitting here? How do we know that Jesus is the Messiah? Because he just tells us so? I think our very natures are attuned to a "show-me" mentality, just like Missouri. Jesus is sitting with his disciples and saying something very similar. If you say you are something, be it a professional or anything else, and you don't do anything to prove it, what's really the point? How do I know that you are what you say you are? We need both the statement and the action to show the true effect.

We find ourselves in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just delivered the Beatitudes, and he moves on to the next part of the sermon: ways of living in this world. He compares his followers to salt, to light, and then talks about faithfulness in light of the scripture. All of these things frame verse 20, which is the scale of faithfulness for us. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." At first glance, alarm bells go off. We want to read into this that we will not have a final reward, that we will not be with those we love after we pass if we do not live beyond the example of the Pharisees and the scribes. That's not quite what Jesus is getting into, and I think we need to take a good look at the grand picture of Jesus' ministry here to get the full meaning of the passage. Let's take a look at this important passage as we dive into the images of salt and light counteracting passive discipleship and finish with Jesus' statement on the scriptures and living righteously.

This last Wednesday, Catherine and I went and saw Food Network star chef Alton Brown perform on a nation-wide tour in Greeley. In that presentation he did many things, but one thing that stands out to me was his 10 Things He's Pretty Sure he's Sure He Knows About Food. Among the things he talked about was that you always, always should wash your fresh mushrooms...right, Catherine? It's because that dirt you see...it's not dirt. It's

pasteurized horse manure. But he said one of the most important things we need to know in all of cooking is when to add the salt and how much to add. It can make or break the dish, for when we don't add it at the right time and in the right amount in the recipe, we need a whole lot more later to make up for the fault. We find that this makes life unhealthy; too much salt later is too late. If you add too much at the right time, you ruin the recipe as well. Salt is so important but it must be administered well and appropriately. But when we consume a good dish, we can't tell by sight whether the amount of salt is appropriate; we can only tell when we taste it. In other words, we can only tell by when it is working.

In the same way, we have Jesus telling us, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid." Light when it is lifted up brings light to all. But when it is hidden, what's the use? Look here; I have a light bulb. It's a handy tool. We look at it and think it will provide the light to guide us in our literally dark times. I plug it into a light socket. If it is good, it will light up and give us the direction we need. However, if it does not, it's not really a light bulb. It's nothing but trash; it's not really good for anything. We see something similar in both of these examples that draw us to find a similar conclusion in Jesus' words. What we have are two scriptures that tell us what it means to be disciples.

What stands out to me with these scriptures is that they are present tense. It's not, "You can be salt for the earth" or "I command you to be salt for the earth." It is "You are the salt of the earth." We are here now and ready to do the task. We have been given gifts, we know what we are good at, and that leads us to be salt and light in the world now. We are ready, and we are to go out into the world. But, of course, the intention is not to do good as an end in itself; it is called to bring glory to God. We know that we attract more flies with honey than vinegar, and we do the same when we are salt to the world. In both of these

images, we have a danger. Jesus says “If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” We have an easy theological pitfall. You can tell I’m fulfilling my call as a pastor by what I do. You can tell if a dish is well seasoned by how it tastes. The light is light when you see it; it is not covered but showing its brightness. These things are active and working; they demonstrate clearly. In other words, you can tell who is a Christian by how they conduct themselves. Jesus is drawing a line between passive and active discipleship.

There is a crucial difference between being passive and being active. Passive discipleship is easy. It’s a list of don’ts. Don’t attack your neighbor; don’t slander or libel. This was the interpretation the Pharisees lifted from the Old Testament scriptures. You know all the list of don’ts, and that, for the most part, is an easy thing to do. Do not do to your neighbor what you do not want done to you. But that’s not Christianity. When we get into active discipleship, that’s when the rubber meets the road. The reason the Seattle Seahawks were so successful last Sunday was because their defense was an active defense that actively disrupted everything the Broncos tried to do on offense. They didn’t just sit back and let the game come to them; they dictated the pace of the game. How do we be the people of God in the world to show our light to all people? It really depends on our gifts, but it means that we do, not simply be. It requires study and preparation, but it also requires that we live in community, among and with one another. It’s not only inside the doors; it’s outside the doors. We all have the tools to do this in many different ways, and it’s up to us to really distinguish how we best do that. We must consistently look for more, seek for better, never clapping for ourselves or considering ourselves the finished product. The Gospel of Christ challenges us to consistently seek better for ourselves and for our neighbors around the world. To be salt and light in light of Jesus’ whole sermon is to be at

work in the world and consistently working for the Kingdom of Heaven. It gets hard; indeed, this whole Christian thing is really hard. It can be so hard that we feel forced to draw inward, to the safety of a quiet life at home and the comfort of a life devoted to bible study and prayer alone. However, when that happens, we hide our lights under a basket. We lose our saltiness; we have ceased to be effective. We have ceased to be the real, acting Christians, inside and out, for faith guides us to act as a response to God's wonderful, loving grace. If that's the case, we aren't living up to that grand and special calling.

Both of these images lead into the final piece of our scripture lesson today. They reinforce the message that Jesus is seeking to give. There's an old phrase that I've heard that I have a hard time agreeing with. "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." Jesus had the scriptures. The Pharisees had the scriptures. They both lifted the scriptures as an integral guide. They both were well read in the scriptures and had a great idea of what the scriptures counted as faithfulness. And yet, they did not agree at all. What this shows us is that scripture is not always self-apparent, and Jesus provides interpretations on the old scriptures that we understand are faithful. If that was true then, it's even more so now when there are phrases or words that we don't quite know how to process. The Pharisees and scribes teach their understanding of scripture is best, but Jesus says their way of living invalidates scripture, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary.

The hardest statement of the passage is that "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Like I said earlier, we get all kinds of things swimming around in our heads about where we will go when we pass and so forth, but I think we're looking at the passage with what we expect rather than what Jesus is trying to tell us. Jesus' intentions here are not to look at the great

beyond but to tell us how what we do here and now matters. As we've talked about in the past, the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven, both the same thing, are a present reality and a future reality. We are a part of it now and in the future; we make it grow when we live in this way as salt and light, being active disciples. When our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we are not talking about salvation; we're talking about how we help grow the Kingdom on the earth right now. They were not being the light and salt in this world; how can the Kingdom be among us when we are not working to be the salt and the light? There is no activity, and so it becomes useless. Just like a pastor who doesn't preach or engage in pastoral care or administration isn't really a pastor, we are faced with something important. When we aren't being actively Christian, actively working to show the world the power of the scriptures, we'll find that we aren't really being Christian at all either. Jesus is essentially saying, "If you want to follow me, put your money where your mouth is," or "Talk the talk and walk the walk." When that happens, the Kingdom becomes alive, and we'll find ourselves in it now, not only down the road.

You are the salt of the world. You are the light of the world. These are statements, not commands, but it also challenges us to grow more and more. It doesn't matter where we are in life, where we are located, what we see as our tasks before us, or what we see our gifts are. God calls us to a place, and we can be salt and light in that place. When we think that the Christian life is to be privately faithful, we lose our saltiness. We are putting our lights under a bushel basket. Church is church because we are together and we are better when we are and do together. With these in mind, be salty and illuminated for God's glory in the world, however you are best called to be so, leaving the confines of a private faith behind. Thanks be to God, Amen and Amen.