

## Sermon for Sunday, February 9, 2020

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Pastor Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-20

Beloved of God, Grace and Peace to you from our savior, Jesus Christ.

A very long time ago I worked in the kitchen at a Lutheran Bible camp. One morning it was my turn to make the oatmeal. I got out the huge pot, poured in however many gallons of water you need to make oatmeal for a hundred people, and when it was boiling I added the oats. Just as we were about to begin serving the campers, the head cook came by and gave it a tasting. Then, she looked at me with displeasure and said, "You forgot the salt. It just doesn't taste right without the salt." Really??? Just a little salt in that huge pot of oatmeal makes that big of a difference?

Sometimes little things make all the difference.

In the pre-electric world, darkness was the norm. Light was modest and surrounded by great darkness. A single lamp, set on a stand, illuminated an entire room. In our modern world, where light is available at the flip of a switch 24/7, we rarely have the experience of complete darkness. But all it takes is one power outage for us to remember that even a single candle can transform a dark room.

Jesus says to us: YOU are the light of the world; YOU are the salt of the earth. It's interesting that Jesus didn't say: You are a great big army, marching into the world. OR, You are a giant loudspeaker put up in the marketplace to shout my message to everyone. A dash of salt ... A single candle ... In the economy of God's reign, little things make all the difference.

We are living in difficult times. There are powerful political, social and cultural forces at work in our country, and in the world, that defy the core values that we as followers of Jesus hold dear. Truth is called a witch hunt. Scientifically verifiable facts are called a hoax. Cruelty, hatred and bigotry are upheld as patriotism. The poor, the refugee, the hungry, the mentally ill, the disabled are decried as losers - as free-loaders who are gaming the system. People of color - even people who were born and raised here - are told to "go back where they came from." Families and little children fleeing viol-

ence and fearing for their lives are called criminals, held in deplorable conditions, denied justice, and sent away. And, even more distressing is that a large swath of folks who claim to be followers of Jesus, who identify as Christians, subscribe to these viewpoints – and do so with great passion.

And I can't speak for you, but there are days when I feel powerless to make a difference. It seems like all the postcards, phone calls, letters, vigils, marches and emails are just so much shouting into the wind. And when those feelings of powerlessness take hold, it isn't long until I feel paralyzed by despair and hopelessness. I am just too small, too insignificant, to be effective.

Then Jesus – the savior of the world, the crucified and risen one, the One in whom and through whom all things came into being, the very Word of God in human flesh – that same Jesus steps up and says: You, yes you, Marion – who is not famous, or influential, or rich - you are the salt of the earth. You, yes you, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church - a small congregation in a little neighborhood, in a small town, in a remote corner of a rural state - you are the light of the world. I have called you by name, I have filled you with my Spirit and because of that, you are who I say you are - and you are enough.

And then I listen to Paul preaching to the church in Corinth – proclaiming the power of God revealed in Jesus' death on the cross. Paul says: I came to you proclaiming the mystery of God, not in lofty words or wisdom, but in Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I remember that we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus, which does not look or feel like POWER – at least not in the way the world names power. It is the way of self-emptying - that in the mystery of God is the way that leads to fullness of life.

And from Isaiah, I hear God spelling out in detail what that way looks like: To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked and to bring the homeless into your own home.

And I hear Jesus say to us, "In everything Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This is the fulfilling of the laws and the prophets."

Last week at our annual meeting, we heard a lot about how we, together, are being salt and light in our community and in the world. From prayer shawls to post cards, from youth retreats, to visiting our elders, each portion takes its place in the combined ministry of Good Shepherd.

One way we will continue this ministry is by our participation in *The Golden Rule 2020 Initiative: A Call for dignity and respect in Politics*. *Golden Rule 2020* is a nationwide effort to live out Jesus' teaching to "Do unto others as we would have them do unto us" and to specifically embody that in our political and issue-based conversations with others. Our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, along with 16 other faith leaders, signed a letter of intent, saying: We all have an important role to play to help heal our nation, increase understanding of each other, and bridge our divisions. The initiative invites us to pray regularly for the healing of divisions in our country and to practice the *Golden Rule* in our political discussions. It's a small thing – one person, speaking with another, listening with empathy to seek understanding and make connections. I know I'd like to have the power of a giant media corporation to blast this message into people's homes, or an army of bots flooding people's social media with compelling messages about the *Golden Rule*. But what we have is us- each individual, each congregation - little by little, living out Christ's command to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And much more importantly, what we have now and will always have is God with us, God for us. We are called to trust that through our ordinary, humble lives God will do what the wisdom and power of this world can never do – and that is to bring the healing, saving, transformative power of God to all creation.

A dash of salt, a tiny flame, a single conversation – these are the small things that God uses to bring about God's reign of justice, mercy, and joy. And here at this table, just a little morsel of bread and a sip of wine, is our Great Thanksgiving Feast. No one would even call it a meal, much less a feast; but for us, it is food that we cannot live without. It is our Lord's Supper, the Feast of Victory, the Foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet. In this little meal we receive that Bread that is Life so that we can go out and share our bread with the hungry. Here we receive the wine that overflows with mercy so that we can go out and share that mercy in an unforgiving world. In this meal, God feeds us with the body and blood of Jesus – the true light, the light which no darkness can overcome – so that we can go out and be a light for the world.