

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany • February 9, 2020<sup>i</sup>

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 5:13-20

“Being SJLC 2020: Working Good”

I like food. Food is a blessing from God, one for which I am not always as thankful as I should be. Particularly when it doesn't taste very good. You can eat a lot of foods which are healthy. Kale comes to mind. But not all those foods taste good. Kale comes to mind, again. And while I am nowhere near as qualified to say this as, say, a professional chef or food critic might be, adding a little bit of salt can do much to improve the taste of your food. It might even make the difference between your wanting to throw something out or enjoying it at the dinner table. If you don't have enough salt, even one of what is arguably one of the best food items ever could be ruined. (I'm looking at you, reduced-sodium bacon!)

Life needs salt. Sure, it makes a world of difference in baking and cooking. You can use salt to preserve foods, too. But beyond its dietary use, look at how we might use salt in other ways. If, for example, we were getting some winter weather like they are in other parts of the country. Sidewalks and driveways and walkways freeze over. Break out the salt! It gets to work, melting the hard ice around it, making it easier for us to clear out the paths where it's been spread.

Life needs light, too. Most of the plants that cover the land and fill the ocean need sunlight to grow and thrive – even kale! And while people have so many means of making artificial light, there's nothing quite like the feeling of sunshine on your face. What's a sunny day like after several days under cloudy skies? Generally speaking, human beings need light to navigate, to work, to play. Light drives out darkness, changing the look of – and even warming – everything it touches.

Epiphany is a season of light. It began as we recalled the star which led the Magi to the child Jesus. As this season has continued, we've heard how the light of Christ has spread out into more and more lives. In last weekend's readings, we heard the portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount more commonly referred to as the Beatitudes: those “Blessed are...” statements that pointed to God's surprising love, how His work doesn't usually look like how we see the world working. And in today's continuation of that Gospel reading, Jesus makes another surprising declaration: his disciples are blessed to be a blessing for the world.

Jesus says, “*You are that which salts the earth.*” You Christians, following Jesus, make the world a better place. You improve the experience of the people around you. **You bring out the flavor that life is meant to have.**

Jesus says, “*You are that which gives light to the world.*” You Christians, following Jesus, make the world less lost. You bring clarity where there is confusion. You drive out the darkness that has surrounded every human being by showing the hope we have in God's Son, making clear the love that God has for each person in this world.

You might be thinking, “Wait a second; that doesn't sound like me!” That's understandable. We can easily forget who we are, whose we are, and what we're meant to do. Every day brings new temptations to ignore the world around you and focus on self. But that's not who you are.

Working good is part of your new identity in Christ. You were made a new creation through the gift of Holy Baptism. You are now linked with Jesus for good: good for you, and good for the world around you. You are a child of God. You are that which salts the earth. You are that which gives light to the world. *That is who you are.*

In the Scripture passage I'd encourage everyone to commit to memory this week, Jesus says, “*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” (Matt. 5:16) If this verse sounds familiar, that might be because it's one we hear as part of the baptismal rite here at St. John's as we present a lit candle to those baptized. But Jesus isn't putting this light-shining out there as an optional activity for people who follow him. Another way of translating it could read, “*I command that your light shine before others...*” Jesus can say that because he's the one who makes it happen. Jesus, who is the Light of the World, shines out through his people. **Jesus salts and lights the world by working good through you.**

We Lutheran Christians can have a hard time processing when it comes to this connection between our faith and good works. That's understandable, too. Back in Martin Luther's time, there was a flawed emphasis on good works as the stuff that helps to put people in right standing before God. That's not at

all what the Bible says. It's actually pretty clear on this point: your hope is in Jesus' good work, not your own. Jesus even says as much in the very next verse. "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" Jesus fulfills all the requirements for you. He puts you in right standing before God. As a Christian author once put it this past decade, "Jesus + Nothing = Everything." That's true. So why does Jesus command that we do good works?

**Working good isn't about your benefit, but your neighbor's.** Jesus came to restore our relationship with our Creator, and restored relationships with the people in the world around us pour out from Jesus' work. That's good stuff. But the even better stuff is that those people might experience God's love for them as you're working good in their life. We Christians are here to serve a world that's in need of help. We can point people to hope that we have in Christ by being who he has made us to be: salt and light. Martin Luther once wrote of this passage in Matthew, "What [Jesus] calls 'good works' here is the exercise, expression, and confession of the teaching about Christ and faith, and the suffering for its sake. He is talking about works by which we 'shine'; but shining is the real job of believing or teaching, by which we also help others to believe."<sup>1</sup> Working good points people to God's grace in Christ.

**So what good can we do around here?** That's one of the five questions we can ask as we join Jesus in his mission – here in northern Virginia or anywhere else our Lord sends us. And while you can certainly put some thought into this question, it's not meant to be one that always requires deep consideration. God puts opportunities for working good in front of you each day. What's a good thing you might do for your child or your parent? Your coworker or the person who serves you at lunch? Will it be an action? A kind word? You've got a lot of choices!

Here's one that's right in front of us. St. John's has hosted the Franconia Area Churches Cooperative for English as Secondary Language (FACCESL) for coming up on twenty(!) years now. Every semester, this program works good in the lives of around 130 of our immigrant neighbors. Members of our congregation and other churches in our area come together to serve as teachers and staff to make that happen. The session starting in a little over a week marks a new opportunity for service. Diane Brody, who has faithfully served as the program's lead coordinator for most of the past two decades, will be transitioning back to serving in a teacher-only role; therefore. If you would like to learn more about assisting the new coordinator with publicity, communications, training, ordering supplies, or one of the many other important activities that Diane has previously done, let us know!

**Jesus calls his disciples to lead extraordinary, remarkable lives.** That doesn't mean that you need to climb mountains or test-pilot spacecraft. Apple once used the phrase "Think Different" in their marketing. As followers of Jesus, we are meant to "Live Different." One of my seminary professors put it this way: "be extraordinary husbands and wives, remarkable neighbors and employees, powerful friends and citizens." Empowered by the Lord's working good in you and through you, you will be salt and light. You will be who you he makes you to be.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Passage for memory:

*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*  
– Matthew 5:16

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, M. (1999). [\*Luther's works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat\*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 21, p. 65). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.