

5th Sunday after The Epiphany
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on February 8, 2026

Isaiah 58:1-12 / Psalm 112:1-10 / 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 / Matthew 5:13-20

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

*If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled
under foot.*

Who here has been told by your doctor to reduce the amount of salt in your diet? I'm not going to ask for a show of hands because that might violate HIPAA. But a lot of people, particularly older and/or heavier persons, have been told to reduce their salt intake. So, this statement of fact by Jesus means nothing. Firstly, what does it mean for salt to lose its saltiness? And secondly, you don't salt your food, anyway!

Salt is very versatile. But let me take a step back: I'm a Chemist, and there is a category of chemicals called *salts*. Technically, a salt is:

A chemical compound consisting of an assembly of cations (positively charged ions) and anions (negatively charged ions)¹.

So, LOTS of chemicals are salts, like baking soda, calcium carbonate or chalk, and potassium chloride which was both an early anti-depressant and a table salt substitute. But putting my pedantic tendencies aside, Jesus in today's Gospel lesson is most likely talking about table salt, which is sodium chloride. It is not only table salt, but the salt in ocean water and what helps you float in the Great Salt Lake and the Dead Sea.

¹ <https://goldbook.iupac.org/terms/view/S05447>

We cannot live without salt: sodium chloride. Our bodies cannot store it, so we need to consume it regularly. We get that through our food. And we all know that processed food and restaurant food tend to have way more salt than we need. That leads to hypertension, cardiac disease, stroke and heart attack! So, as with most things:

What you need can also kill you, so everything in moderation.

Salt can do other things. Those of you with vegetable gardens know that salt is a preservative. Salt lowers the freezing point of water so it can help melt snow on roads ... not that we have to worry about that. A saltwater bath can relax muscles. Salt is very versatile.

Light is another thing we cannot live without. I'll start with the science bit: Light is both a particle and a wave ... and scientists don't really understand how and why. So, for those anti-religites out there who say that they trust science because science knows everything, well, "science" confirmed the dual nature of light ny 1924, and they still haven't fully figured it out. The dual nature of Christ was confirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. We've got this!

Light illuminates, and that's what Jesus is focusing on in today's Gospel. I don't need to tell you this, but houses in Jesus' time didn't have overhead lighting controlled by a simple light switch. House builders were not asking if the homeowner wanted recessed lighting or a dimmer switch. After sundown, the house was lit by candle or lamp – in the poor household and in the rich one. But what Jesus is pointing out is that even the smallest of light source could illuminate the darkest of rooms:

...on the lampstand, it gives light to all in the house.

Like salt, light has multiple functions. Not only does light illuminate, it generates heat. Thank goodness for the light of the Sun! And light also generates electricity, which, in turn, can create light! There's definitely a sermon in *that* somewhere!

In today's Gospel, Jesus clearly wants us to focus on each of us being the flavor enhancer and illuminator for God's purposes in the world. And I say "AMEN!" to that. But I want to explore what else we can do as the Salt of the Earth and Light of the World that may be sorely needed in our complicated time ... and that is *to heal*.

Both salt and light are used to heal wounds. Your first reaction when you hear "*salt and wounds*" is probably to wince! Throwing salt on a wound hurts!!! It hurts so much that it's become a platitude: to throw salt on a wound is to add insult to injury. People have been using salt and saltwater as an antiseptic and an anti-inflammatory for centuries. Salt – as saline solution – is still used to clean out infected wounds and scrapes. Salt – to a certain degree – helps the healing process as an antibacterial. Fun Fact: Normal saline solution is water with a salt concentration of 0.9%, which is the same balance of water and salt as human blood.²

Light can also help the healing process. I was in Phoenix Airport a couple of weeks ago, and there was a small sign on the handrail of the escalator informing us that it was cleaned with UV light. UV light is used as a disinfectant in hospitals. It can improve immune responses and promote health. Light therapy is a good treatment for a variety of skin problems like psoriasis and eczema, despite also having the potential to cause skin cancer.

So, both salt and light can be used to *heal*. And while Jesus is focusing on the flavor and illumination qualities of salt and light, what if we were to be the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World to help *heal* our wounded society, our wounded world?

² <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/saline-solution>

We come hear each Sunday to engage with Christ through Word and Sacrament. Our worship experience is to be transformative. As Christians, we pray that we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. Next week's Gospel is The Transfiguration, a stark reminder of that goal of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Our lesson from Isaiah this morning also reminds us that we come to be transformed. The prophet warns that religious practice is worse than useless if it is not accompanied by social justice.

Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

Our fasting, our prayer, our worship is pointless if we are not transformed. The prophet reminds us that God is not concerned with the transformation of our worship to serve our needs. God is concerned that our worship transforms *us* to serve the needs of others. As we are transformed into the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World, can we be transformed into *healers* of the wounds of society?

Similarly, today's Psalm shows us that the righteous man gives freely to the poor and is always ready to lend to the needy. He does this because he lives a life based on trust in God. We can help heal our community by serving the underserved. Social justice is a strong theme for YHWH and Jesus. Social justice is indeed serving the poor, the widow, the orphan and the resident alien, as is listed in Deuteronomy. But it is also being on the side of any who are marginalized. We help heal their wounds by walking alongside them, speaking out, and using our privilege on behalf of those who have none. That transformation of privilege into healing comes when we take the Sacrament and feast on the God who died a gruesome death and rose from the grave so that *all* may live. His fulfillment of the

Law was not to abdicate us from our responsibilities. It was to transform us into agents of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The significance of Jesus' fulfillment of the Law turns 1C Judaism upside down without abolishing it. The Torah, the Temple, Jerusalem, the Nation of Israel: They are no longer the center of our relationship with God. They still exist; they are still important; we can still learn from them. But they are no longer the Salt of the Earth or the Light of the World. In Jesus, the Salt and Light are His followers, the Church. So, Jesus commissions us to flavor and illumine, but we also can *heal* our wounded world.

In a time when White Christian Nationalism is claiming power and authority and using their faith to justify cruelty to others, we can be the Salt and the Light that can heal those wounded by other parts of the Church. We can welcome them in and show them how we see Jesus and the ways in which we understand Jesus to be calling us to work in this world.

So many people are wounded by the Church, wounded by the hatred that is masquerading as "God's will". And so many of those wounded people just want to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We can be both, the Salt of the Earth and Light of the World in an evangelistic way, the way Jesus is calling us to be in today's Gospel, *and* in a healing way, to clean out those wounds and kill the "bacteria" of bad theology so that they can begin to heal.

To be the Salt of the Earth and Light of the World, Jesus says that our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Get used to hearing that, because "righteousness" is a strong theme in Matthew's Gospel. But we have to remember that Jesus' fulfillment of the Law meant that there was a new way of being righteous. Jesus didn't abolish the Law, He came to fulfill it. So, now, to be righteous beyond that of the Scribes and Pharisees is not to go above and beyond the Law. It is to seek the Kingdom of Heaven that has now broken into our world today through Jesus Christ. The path to righteousness is to make

God's Kingdom a reality in our own selves, which cannot come about simply by shaking the book at others – like the Scribes and the Pharisees did and White Christian Nationalists do – but by changing our hearts and minds so that they are open to welcoming God in. To be the Salt of the Earth and Light of the World is to point others to that Kingdom *and* to help them heal the wounds inflicted by an unjust society.

Jesus is calling us to bring flavor and illumination to the people, He is also calling us to be agents of healing. Our nation is grieving. Our nation is injured. It is in need of healing. 2,000 years of Christian history have demonstrated that Jesus is not the type to break into Earth through the skies and zap the evil with lightning through His fingers and scoop up the righteous in His arms and take them to Heaven. 2,000 years of Christian history has shown us that we are the hands and feet of Jesus. To be the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World is not only to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is to bring healing to our communities and our nation so that Christ may be known among those peoples.

Let us be the Salt and Light to heal our wounded society. It's probably going to hurt! But that's necessary for any healing to begin.