

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been made fun of by someone calling you a name? Have you ever called someone a name? Sure we have, all of us have, on both accounts...we've called someone a name and someone has called us a name. Its still fairly early in the morning, nonetheless, we might have already did so today. Traffic is practically nonexistent when I come to church on a Sunday morning, so today, I haven't had the opportunity to call someone a name...yet...but there is the drive home. I'm sure we all have responded to the hurt of being called a name by saying out loud or to ourselves that age old remedy: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." While this rhyme is our defense against name-calling and verbal bullying...intended to increase resiliency, avoid physical retaliation, all while we attempt to remain calm and indifferent...nonetheless, the names still hurt when we think about them or remember them...don't they?

I still remember the times I was made fun of, but I still vividly remember the name my first-grade teacher used to call me...and yes, it still bothers me a little after all these years when I recall it or think about it...and I think...if only she would have encouraged that very shy kid instead of belittling him. Likewise, in light of what we hear in our Gospel today, instead of using our faith to speak poorly about others, or call others names or belittle others in order to elevate ourselves from the world around us, what would happen if our faith lifted others...encouraged others, and enhanced others...rather than name-calling and bullying for our own righteousness' sake.

I say all of this because today we hear Jesus calling us names as he continues to preach to us from his Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard Jesus say:

- ³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- ⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- ⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- ⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- ⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
- ¹⁰ 'Blessed are those
who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)

Jesus is telling us that the poor, mournful, meek, and those hungry for righteousness are blessed. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are the persecuted, blessed they are. But now today, picking right up where he left off last week in our Gospel lesson, we hear a shift in the intention of the words of Jesus. It's no longer "those", now it's you, it's me, it's actually, you'll, you all...meaning, all of us. Jesus is making an indicative claim by calling us, salt, calling us light, and calling us a city on the hill.

I've been called a lot of things in my life, but I am not insulted by being called salt, light, or a city. And I don't think, or at least I hope that, no one will be upset with the names we are being called this morning. But, if so, sticks and stones...remember?

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not asking us to think about this salt thing, or that you might be light, or consider being a city on a hill...Jesus is stating who we are as followers, as disciples, as Baptized children of God.¹ So, for all intents and purposes, Jesus is not really calling us a name, he is just simply stating what we are as followers or as disciples. Furthermore, Jesus is not telling us to try harder to be salt, to try harder to be light, or to be a city on the hill...Jesus is indicatively saying, *you are* salt, *you are* light, *you are* a city on a hill. So what does Jesus really mean by calling us these things? What is Jesus really saying? Are we salt? Are we light? Are we a city on a hill? If we are the Christians we claim to be, then we are salt, light, and a city, why then all the divisiveness and hatred in the streets around us these days?

When we hear that we are salt of the earth, we probably don't take offense because we seem to know that this title describes a person who is exceptionally honest, reliable, humble, and kind. It is not an insult, it is a compliment for someone who is down-to-earth, trustworthy, and without pretense.

But look at what we are being called, salt, light, and a city...none of these things exist for themselves, they exist for something else. Salt by itself is the ONE thing in the culinary world that is predominantly useless *on its own*. Salt *only* works when it is *added* to something else. Furthermore, salt isn't needed in the culinary world. A steak still tastes decent without the salt...but it is certainly *enhanced* by salt. A pretzel is fine without salt, but it is enhanced by salt. Nearly every other food can exist and somewhat function on its own without salt and still be rather tasty but they too are enhanced by salt. Salt is added to the ice when churning ice cream in order to make the ice colder. Salt is only of use and of benefit when it is *applied* to something else.² Salt *enhances* what it is added to but salt also preserves. Before refrigeration, salt was added to meat in order to preserve it for the winter months. But at the same time, too much salt can overtake or even destroy something it is added to.

Likewise, light is that by which other things are seen or other things are illuminated. Ancient manuscripts and letters are decorated by hand with gold, silver, or colored designs and we say that the manuscripts are illuminated, or we can say they are enhanced by the illumination of gold, silver, and colored designs. Light makes other things visible. Light reveals other things, but light is for the sake of something else. Light is nothing really until it is placed into darkness.

In the day that Jesus is preaching this very sermon, there were trade routes and paths and a city on the hill was a marker, landmark, or an indicator for those journeying along those roads. A city on a hill would help and assist navigating the routes. The cities on a hill were a means of navigation for tradesmen, merchants, shepherds, or any traveler who was making their way along unknown or unfamiliar routes. The city on the hill, as Jesus says, cannot be *hidden*, the city on the hill is

¹ Preacher to Preacher Moment by Karoline Lewis posted on YouTube. This short clip is an extension of the discussion begun at Working Preacher, Sermon Brainwave 1067: Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - February 8, 2026.

² David W. Litwin. "Salt of the Earth?" What an Insult! Recognizing the warning from a supposedly "positive" metaphor. November 22, 2022. <https://medium.com/backyard-theology/salt-of-the-earth-what-an-insult-75dbb822d9b4>

seen by all who look upon it in a time of need...such as navigation, because the city cannot be hidden, it is seen. This is why Jesus calls us salt, light, and a city on the hill.

We are Baptized children of God, we are disciples, we are people of faith, and if we have the faith we claim to have, our faith is the salt that enhances others' faith...and NOT our own. If we have the faith we claim to have, our faith is the light that illuminates others' faith...and NOT our own. If we have the faith we claim to have, our faith is a city that is NOT kept to itself, it is seen by others and guides others who see it. Too many times, I hear folks say, my faith is mine and I come to church for *me*, I read my Bible for me to strengthen *my* faith. We even hear Jesus say to us a little later in this very Gospel: ¹'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; (Matthew 6:1b).

We tend to see our faith in the same way we see or understand our piety. But our piety is our outward expression of our faith through actions, rituals, and devotion. Our piety is the fruit of *our* faith. I cannot expect someone to replicate or mirror my faith any more than expecting a tomato plant to grow apples.

What Jesus is saying to us this morning by calling us salt, light, and a city on a hill, is that your faith is nothing if it does not enhance, preserve, illuminate, or even guide others. Salt is not salt unless it is used to enhance something other than itself. Light is not light unless it is used in the darkness to illuminate something other than itself. A city on a hill is just a city but becomes something more when it is seen by others and used to guide or direct others.

It is impossible for salt to lose its saltiness, it just isn't salt if there is not saltiness, and it only becomes salt when added to something else. Likewise, our faith is not faith if it is NOT enhancing others, preserving others, illuminating others, or guiding and helping others in their journeys. St. Paul tells the church in Rome why we are salt, light, and a city and tells us also:

¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?"

¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:14-17)

Bonhoeffer also reminded his students in the underground seminaries of Nazi Germany just before he was taken prisoner and hanged in a concentration camp,

"The church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus Christ. The Church will place its confidence only in the simple servant of the Word of Jesus Christ because it knows that then it will be guided, NOT according to human wisdom and human conceit, but by the Word of the Good Shepherd."³

...who is Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*, Harper, San Francisco: 1954, page 109.

We have been blessed with the very faith that has been poured into our hearts by God... a faith that enhances, preserves, illuminate, and guides each of us, as well as others. St. Paul reminds us of the workings of that very faith in his second letter to the church in Corinth:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Corinthians 4:5-7)

We are the clay jars that God has poured His treasured faith into for all the world to see. May those who look upon faith NOT be shamed or belittled, rather, may all be enhanced, preserved, illuminated, and guided by the power of God's grace, mercy, and new life. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but the names we are called today will not only save me, but others as well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.