

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 08, 2026

The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom

on

Matthew 5:13-20

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Salt and Light

I come to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Come with me to a city where the air is filled with tension. It's an occupied city

full of soldiers and any resistance is met with threats or worse.

The people of goodwill are not sure how to act. Do they join large public actions or try to be more discreet? What does faithfulness require here?

It's AD 30, and we're in a field near the Sea of Galilee. There's a charismatic teacher who's asked you to follow him, and he started attracting large crowds. The religious and

political leaders are getting suspicious. They are tracking his every movement, his every word, and so he goes a little higher up the mountain, and you, a friend, and 30 or so others go to join him. He sits down and says,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Hmm. He's got everyone's attention.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." You turn to your friend and say "that's nice." He keeps going.

"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God." You start to wonder, *pure in heart?* Is that me?

"Blessed are those who make peace. One day, they will be called children of God." And now you're suspicious. *Make peace?* I'm not sure that he's talking about me.

But then he removes all doubt, and he says, “blessed are *you* when people insult you and persecute you falsely because of me. They’ll call you all kinds of names, but be glad for your reward is great in heaven.”

He said, blessed are you, right? Like me? I guess he is talking about me.

The poor in spirit, those who are mourning, the meek, the unimpressive, the merciful, the pure in heart, those hungering and thirsting for things to be made right. If any of those describe you he may be speaking about you.

So, he continues and Jesus says,

“You are the salt of the earth.” What a sweet thing to say. We still say that today. I heard this a lot growing up in the south. If somebody is good they are the salt of the earth. That’s kind of the highest compliment you can get.

My uncle made this promise to God years ago. I’m not totally sure why. But if someone is broke down on the side of the road he always stops to help them. Now, not everyone should do this, but he does. And every time when he’s done they say the same thing, “is there something I can do to repay you?”

And he always says the same thing. He says, “no, you can’t repay me. But soon, someone will need your help. They’ll ask for your help, and you can repay me by saying Yes” – salt of the earth.

Salt is small and simple.

Just a little bit goes a long way, and Sometimes what is needed is just a little bit of salt. Something small and simple.

The prophet Isaiah says, “is this not the fast that I have chosen to find clothing to those who need it? To give bread to someone who is hungry.”

There are cities right now in America where evil looms large and the smallest acts of goodness are met with disdain or violence. There are tens of thousands of people who cannot even open their door for risk of losing their lives or their children.

And they will need more, but right now, in this moment, what they need is simple.

Food, diapers, soap.

And hundreds, hundreds of people every day go to the grocery store and load up their carts and drop off the needed groceries at their neighbor's front door. And as they drive away they see someone peek out the door and grab the little they need. Safe. Fed. Clean.

Salt.

The evil that terrorizes them and us would like us to think that these small acts

don't really move the needle much at all, and sometimes it seems that they're right.

Sometimes faithfulness requires us to think small. Malcolm Guite recently said in an

interview that if we give up on the small things like fishing or poetry in moments like this it is almost as if the evil has already won. What we need is small.

But Jesus is not just speaking about small acts of faithfulness in our Gospel, he continues this bold speech, and he tells his disciples, "you are the light of the world."

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is the light of the world. Israel is a light to the

Nations. In the gospels, Jesus is often referred to, you may know, as the light of the

world, but here he tells his disciples, *you* are the light of the world.

And just as if you cannot hide an entire city you cannot put your candle under a basket or bushel. You must put it on a lampstand so that everything is lit, it is big, bold, the light of the world.

Jesus isn't this a bit much? You can almost hear these people on the hillside as they call out, and they're from a culture we're calling out to Jesus would have been pretty normal,

not as much here, but you can almost hear them, one saying, "I'm just a tax

Collector. I'm not even sure that the work I do is moral. I'm the light of the world? You

can hear another one. "I'm just a fisherman, Jesus." "I just take care of children and I can't even get them to listen to me, I am the light of the world?"

There's a lot of these people in New York—big lights from small towns so we come here to be amongst the skyscrapers. We're called too much, too big, too eccentric. And so we come to New York where we can let our lights shine with all of their glory.

And sometimes faithfulness requires discrete groceries, and sometimes it requires something more public and dramatic. Sometimes what the world needs is big public displays. Big gatherings and surprise birthday parties when you turn 50. Small things won't do here. We need big Christmas parades to gather some goodwill. We need marches on Washington to show the world what America could actually be. Or as the prophet Isaiah says, "is this not the fast that I have chosen to loose the bands of wickedness? to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke."

Can't hide behind our small acts of contrition. Sometimes the faithfulness must be

big in public. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

In Minneapolis, every night, people take shifts holding vigil at the places where Renée Good and Alex Pretti were killed, so their sites are never left unattended. They did the same thing a few blocks away where George Floyd was killed six years ago.

Some acts of faithfulness are small *and* public, salt and light.

Sometimes being the salt of the earth does not feel like it's enough. Sometimes being the light of the world is scary or risky. Sometimes it seems the small acts are too small and the public displays are far too risky or don't move the needle much at all. Like no matter what we do, small or large, evil always triumphs.

And it really does seem sometimes like evil will win.

So why try?

The reward for boldness and kindness seems like nothing but dejection and pain.

But what are we doing this for?

What does faithfulness require? Who are we faithful to?

If you have enemies, and I suppose you do, whether physical or spiritual in some sense, what they would want for you is to think that the small acts are never enough, that the public displays *are* too risky. And we all have to discern what our role is and what faithfulness requires for us, but for those who are in Christ, you are the salt of the earth. You're the light of the world. And faithfulness does not require us to solve every problem or remain safe at all costs.

The prophet Isaiah tells us what happens when we are faithful, "that the light will shine forth like the morning and the glory of the Lord will be your reward."

Or as Jesus says we "do good works so that others will see them and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." This Jesus is the one to whom we are faithful, who names us as salt and light, who sends his spirit to equip us to be who he has called us to be and in so doing, we give glory to God, for whom no act of kindness is too small.

There is no risk so great who has waiting for us a well-seasoned banquet in heaven, and when he returns the Lord will be our light, and the blessings of the

beatitudes will become as felt as the salt on your tongue and as seen as the light
in your candle. And he will say on that day, “well done,
my good and faithful servant.”

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