

Title: The Remarkably Common
yet Commonly Remarkable Christian Life
Church Year: 5th Sunday after Epiphany, series A
Theme: Vocation
Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus spoke the words of today's Gospel lesson to a mixed crowd of disciples – to people who had answered His call to repentance, and believed. There were other non-believers in the distance, but these words were not for them. I preach this sermon to you today under the assumption that each of you are disciples of Christ – people who have answered His call to repentance, and believe.

Back on the mountainside one could surely find quite the variety of disciples: People of different ages, both genders, and different occupations. **“You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth,”** Jesus proclaims without qualification over the entire diverse crowd of disciples.

I imagine two fishermen standing next to each other, exchanging awkward glances. “Does this guy realize that all we know how to do is fish. He's saying that we're the light of the world and the salt of the earth, what with our dirty fingernails, cracked skin, matted hair, and (let's be honest) fishy smell?!” Jesus says, “Absolutely.”

And the same goes for each of you, without qualification. You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. If we are to believe what Jesus said, who you are and what you do, evidently, is very significant. Yet, like those two fishermen who may have been present, when we look at our lives it is quickly apparent that they are very common - little different even than those who do not follow Christ. We have the same responsibilities, the same jobs, the same needs, the same accomplishments, and the same disappointments. With this text in mind, we

find ourselves living the paradox that the Christian life of service is at the same time remarkably common, and commonly remarkable.

Human beings are rational thinkers, and as such paradoxes are difficult for us. We much prefer it when things make sense. As a result we have a tendency to want to resolve this paradox that is the Christian life.

One way we do this is to convince ourselves that we cannot properly serve God and neighbor in common ways. In other words, the true Christian life isn't really common. We cannot be the light of the world or the salt of the earth in common, everyday, and even unglamorous ways. We saw a lot of this problem in thinking in the Christian Church of the Middle Ages. To please God and serve Him it was thought that one must become a monk or a nun and devote themselves to a life of prayer, poverty, submission, and seclusion. God could not be truly pleased with the work of a blacksmith, tanner, farmer, or soldier.

I wonder if we sometimes fall into the same trap. Do we at times find ourselves thinking that God would be happier with the work that we do if we would only go to the seminary to become a pastor? Or perhaps God would be more pleased with my work if I were an overseas missionary, or at the very least an elder in my church. Perhaps you recognize that a career in the church is not necessary to please God, but you have a hard time recognizing your service to Him in your current job. Perhaps it seems too simple to you, too average. You would much rather serve God as an engineer, doctor, lawyer, or company executive. Perhaps your dreams of a different or better job have caused you to neglect your duties at your current job. Perhaps your dissatisfaction with your day-to-day life has caused you to neglect your vocation of spouse, or parent, or child.

After my first year of seminary I got a summer job as the office administrator at a local Early Childhood Center. One week when the flu was running rampant through all the toddler

classrooms, one sick child found that he could not hold his lunch. All the other teachers had their hands full in the classrooms, so it fell upon me to clean up what this child produced on the floor. In the middle of the very unpleasant process I began grumbling, “Why am I doing this? I’m only making \$8.50 per hour cleaning up this mess when I could be studying for the vocation to which God has called me.” Then I caught myself. God had not called me to be a pastor. Not yet. I didn’t have call documents in my hands. But God had most certainly placed a wet mop in my hands. I failed to realize that cleaning up that mess was the most God-pleasing thing I could possibly do at that moment.

Do you have a job? If so, that is your vocation, whatever it might be. Is your name on a marriage certificate? If so, you have the vocation of spouse. Do you have a child, grandchild, or parent? If so, you know what your vocation is. God is calling you to serve in the capacities in which He has placed you – no more and no less. Nothing else would make Him happier. In this way, our service to God can be remarkably common, and may not look any different from the roles fulfilled every day by those who do not follow Christ. But Jesus still says, “**You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.**” We remain in the paradox.

There is another way we try to resolve the paradox: We slip into the mindset that the Christian life of service is never really remarkable. Nothing we do in this life really means anything. I’m afraid this problem runs rampant in the Lutheran Church especially. Why do you suppose many of us Lutherans are always seen walking around with solemn faces looking at the ground? It’s not because most of us are German!! Well... maybe that’s part of it, but it’s mostly because we take an honest look at life. When we look around, we see a suffering world tainted by sin, evil, death, and corruption. Given a beautiful, freshly picked rose a Lutheran will be the first to think, “too bad they only stay pretty for a few days before withering and dying.” When

someone wins the lottery a Lutheran will be the first to think, “Imagine how much of that is going to be taken out in taxes – not to mention the whole ‘root of all evil’ thing.”

God bless us, this stems from a healthy realization that the world is broken, and only the second coming of Christ will fix it all. We Lutherans do not wear the blinders of the prosperity preachers and televangelists who preach that a blissful world is within our reach; we look to Jesus. Unfortunately, this often leads us to a defeatist attitude that destroys our paradox. In other words, far too often we give up on the remarkable potential found in Christ working through us here and now.

This defeatist attitude can take many forms. We think that once we retire, there’s no significant work left for Christ to do through us. We think that our lost friend, neighbor, or family member is too far-gone to ever listen to the saving Word of the Gospel, and so our lips remain sealed. We insist on limiting the glory we bring to God to the work He does in us on Sunday mornings. Christ gives us the most amazing and remarkable job of being the light of the world and the salt of the earth, yet we refuse Him under the guise of Christian piety that looks only to Christ’s return.

When we disciples make mistakes like this we do not cease to be light and salt, but our actions begin to look a lot like those who have no hope – like the actions of unbelievers that are “no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” It is clear that God commonly expects remarkable things from us... even in our remarkably common lives. We remain in our paradox.

But this is a good thing, because in this paradox Christ’s glory is revealed. The remarkably common things we do in our lives by faith are made remarkable in Christ. These are made remarkable because they display the reign of Christ. Christ came to the earth to reconcile a

corrupt world and a corrupt people to God through His miracles and through His death on the cross. He displays this victory in the lives of His disciples every day:

- A baptismal sponsor, acting in faith, is bringing Christ's reconciling work on the cross to their Godchild every time they pray for him or her.
- A new parent is bringing Christ's reconciling work on the cross to their baby every time they change a dirty diaper.
- Remember that disgusting mess I had to clean up at the Early Childhood Center? That work wasn't glamorous, but it was certainly glorious, because Christ reigned in that moment. 55

It doesn't matter to which vocations God has called you in this life, be it farmer, lawyer, mother, son, doctor, CEO, pastor, grandfather, U.S. citizen, or tax attorney. In all of these remarkably ordinary vocations a Christian can serve God and man in remarkable ways – not because they appear remarkable to the human eye in every case, but because they display Christ's reign on earth. That, you must admit, IS remarkable!

An older gentleman sits down and looks at his hands. These hands had seen a lot the past 70 years, to be sure. They bear the scars left behind from cuts and burns. These hands had once wielded a heavy axe that splintered heavy locked doors. These hands were strong hands that at one time had carried two small children to safety. These hands had lifted up heavy piles of burning debris as he made his way into danger when everyone else was fleeing from it. But those days were long gone. The hands were not as strong anymore. They were wrinkled and weaker now, with joints suffering from arthritis. Now they could barely support an ink pen well enough to write a note, much less wield a heavy axe.

Some people might say that these hands weren't good for much of anything anymore. But this man knew better. He just smiled as a tiny pink plastic cup no bigger than a golf ball was

placed delicately into these hands, and his 5 year old granddaughter asked, “Would you like some more tea, Grandpa?”

This man was doing something remarkable. He was being the light of the world and the salt of the earth as he fulfilled his vocation of grandfather. In so doing he pleased God just as much as he ever had as a firefighter. Something as remarkably ordinary as a make-believe tea party with a little girl and a few stuffed animals became a remarkable expression of love from grandfather to granddaughter.

The work that we do as Christians is not really our work at all. It is Christ’s work through us. If it were ours we would have good reason to be pessimistic, as we can do no good thing on our own. But thanks be to God we have Christ in us. Jesus does not say “You could be the light of the world and the salt of the earth...” No, He says “You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.” Can you imagine a light that does not shine, or salt that does not season? Neither can God. Our power to shine and season is inherent within us as Christ is in us.

Ask yourself this, then: What are my vocations? In what remarkably common yet commonly remarkable ways has Christ called me to live as His disciple? If you are burdened by the fact that you have hampered Christ’s light from shining and His salt from seasoning as much as it could by going about your vocations half-heartedly, know that you are completely forgiven. You may leave here today, then, with a clean slate and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve God in remarkable ways through the vocations in which He has placed you. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, through His death on the cross Your Son has reconciled me and the whole world to You. He has also made His home in me through faith by the power of His Holy Spirit. Empower me this week through the same, as I bring into the world our Savior’s reconciliation through all my vocations with joy and excellence. In the name of Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Duane Meissner

Feb. 6, 2011.

Church of the Reformation-Lutheran, Affton, Missouri