

# Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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## Introduction

Jesus gets into the meat of the Sermon on the Mount by comparing his listeners to salt. And then he calls us a city on a hill and a lamp on a stand. With each comparison, Jesus blurs the line between being and doing. Who we are is what we do.

Yet instead of letting us be passive, Jesus challenges us to live in ways that are aggressively at odds with the world.

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## Text

“You are the salt of the earth; but 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 underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

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## Comment

Integrity invites conflict.

Salt can't help being salty; adding salt will invariably affect the food that it touches. A city on a hill can't be there without being noticed. And a lamp—when allowed to shine—will make a clear difference in a room.

With these strange, subtle comparisons, Jesus reminds us that we can't help having an effect on our environment *if* we are doing what we were created to do. Following Jesus will make us stick out; it will bring us into conflict with the way things are. If it doesn't, we are doing something wrong.

It's funny: salt and light are so ubiquitous that to consider that we are like them can suggest that there's nothing we need to do but just *be* – and be forgotten (like salt and light are forgotten). But it's quite the opposite. If and when we manage to simply *be* Christians – we stick out glaringly.

That's good to remember for many of us who live in societies that have long conflated a cosy type of Christianity with cultural norms. To be 'Christian' has been for some a means to uphold the values of a nation and to disappear into polite society. Part of the appeal of being labelled 'Christian' has been knowing we won't stick out as 'other.' Times are changing, and in some contexts it no longer feels comfortable to identify with the label 'Christian.' In other contexts, it never did.

But as Jesus reminds us: being forgotten or disappearing into the scenery has never been the point for Christians. Salt that loses its saltiness is trampled underfoot. Being unnoticeable means being good for nothing. But to be a light that shines in the darkness?

That would be something.

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## Response

This passage lends itself to a conversation about how and if our Christianity causes us to stick out.

A 2007 survey by a California-based research firm (the Barna Group) found that a majority of young people in America described Christians as being judgemental, hypocritical and anti-gay. One wonders how many people in 2020 would immediately associate Christianity with grace, forgiveness, justice and love.

At Corrymeela we recently invited members of the community to act out their relationship with Christianity. We placed a bible in the middle of the room and asked participants to move closer to or farther from it as a way to demonstrate their changing degree of self-identification with the label 'Christian.' The exercise opened up a discussion about what we believe Christianity is in its ideal form versus how we observe Christianity in the real world. Participants disclosed a growing discomfort with the label Christian even as they remained grounded by a desire to live out a Christ-like love.

The term 'Christian' may draw attention in ways we may not welcome, but the call to be Christ-like and to follow Jesus along righteous paths still compels us to behave in noticeably different ways.

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## Prayer

Light of the World,  
When we draw attention to ourselves,  
may it be for living like you.  
And if we stand out from the crowd,  
may it be for standing up for what is right.

Amen.