

I had a very Lutheran day yesterday at Bishop Kevin's installation, but this week I also attended a ministerium meeting with our neighbors of different Christian denominations, and immediately following that, I attended a meeting of interfaith leaders representing other Christian denominations and other religions. It got me thinking of how we religious folks sometimes have the bad habit of thinking about our piety and practice as "right" and others' as "wrong" when we would be much better off thinking of our traditions as *helpful*, or not. Take for example baptism: since the Lutheran tradition is to baptize people of any age, if you've been a Lutheran all your life, you probably were baptized when you were too young to remember a candle being lit for you and the charge from today's gospel being given: *So let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* One of the helpful things about other denominations making you wait until you are old enough to ask to be baptized is that you probably have a better understanding of what is happening and a longer-lasting memory of it. But one of the helpful things about baptizing an infant, who is totally dependent on others to survive and thrive, is that we can see how it is obviously *not* the one being baptized who is making the baptism happen; it is *God's* work—not even the work of the parents presenting the child or the minister presiding over the sacrament. When we see it as God's action, we know we have been forever adopted into the family of faith—nothing we did and nothing we can do will change our identity as beloved children of God.

Keep that in mind when we hear Jesus say, *You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?* It's sort of a trick question. Salt is salt; it can't stop being salty. You can mix it into something else, and if you mix in too much you can keep adding other ingredients until you dilute the taste, but the salt will always be salty. A city built on a hill will always be visible. A lamp—and remember to think of it in historical context as an oil lamp with an open flame—a lamp when it's lit can't be hidden under a basket, because the basket will catch fire and the house will burn down. No, all of Jesus' examples are things that cannot be undone. Just like salt can't

grow less salty, we cannot be less than what we are—children and disciples of God. And just like salt is going to continue to flavor food, and a city built on a hill is going to attract the attention of travelers—and sometimes, honestly, enemies, and a lamp is going to light up the whole house, our lives are going to have *some* effect on the people around us. The question isn't will we impact others or won't we...the question is *what kind of effect* are we called to have?

The thing about salt and lamps, if not necessarily cities on hills, is that they don't exist for themselves; they are no good without acting on the environment around them. Salt has always been extremely valuable for its many uses, but it needs to be put to good use: it preserves food, it makes your caramel chocolate taste better; it restores your body chemistry after you sweat; it melts the ice on your sidewalk—well, maybe not in these temperatures. Sitting in the cabinet is not what salt is meant to do. So, too, a lamp isn't useful if it's not lit, nor does it need its own light; it makes light so that the people around it aren't lost in the dark. Always, always the direction of the gospel of Jesus Christ is outward; the good news is for us, but not for us to keep—it's for us to share.

If we know that, like it or not, and whether we try to or not, we *will* impact the people and the world around us, and that our whole purpose in being called as God's children is to live not for ourselves but for others, then what should our shining light look like? What are the good works that others are supposed to see us do that will lead them to give glory to our Father in heaven? Isaiah is glad we asked, because he answers that question for us:

*To loose the bonds of injustice; to undo the straps of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; to cover the naked; to stop pointing the finger and speaking evil; to satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday; Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly; Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, 'Here I am.'*

We know what God has called us to do, what it looks like to shine the light of Christ in a world of deep darkness. May God who has made us for this work give us the desire and the strength to go out and do it.