"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says to His disciples. "You are the light of the world." Notice what Jesus doesn’t say. He doesn’t say, “If you would just try harder you could be the salt of the earth” or “If you would just be better you would be the light of the world.” No, Jesus says we already are these things, salt and light, simply by virtue of the fact that we are His disciples. By virtue of the fact that we seek to follow Him, seek to be formed by His teachings, have been redeemed by His love. We – gathered here this morning – we are the salt of the earth, says Jesus. We are the light of the world. Jesus has a rather high opinion of us, doesn’t He – but if He says it, it must be so. You, me – we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

But what, then, does it mean for us be these things? To give the shorthand answer, I think being salt has to do with our Christian character – who we are; and being light has to do with our Christian actions – what we do in Jesus’ name. Together – character and actions, identity and deeds – we have a profound effect on this world for Christ and His Kingdom. As salt and light – believers in and doers of His Word – we play an important role in the drawing near of the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced at the beginning of His public ministry.

"You are the salt of the earth." Salt in the ancient world served two basic functions. It served as seasoning for food and, in an age before refrigeration, it served as a preservative for food. Disciples, says Jesus, simply by being who they are – disciples of Jesus – exercise a similar function in the world around them. Seasoning the secular world around them with the flavor of Christ’s love. Preserving a corrupted and corrupting world, and those therein, from falling into even deeper decay. Disciples of Christ, simply by being disciples of Christ, offer the world a contrast, a different option, a way of being in the world that builds up rather than breaks down.

Think of the Kingdom values Jesus just outlined for us in His Beatitudes: things like being humble, caring for those who hurt, seeking justice for all, showing mercy, staying pure in body and spirit, working for peace both relationally and globally. The Beatitudes mark out the character of a Christian in much the same way as Paul’s list of the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. When Christians, disciples of Christ, manifest these characteristics in their daily interactions with others – when Christians simply are who they are as Christians as they go about their daily business – then, says Jesus, this world is being seasoned by the grace of His goodness in us. Then this world is being preserved from further rot by the presence of His saving power made manifest in us.
Let me give a practical example. I’m borrowing this from another pastor, who addressed these words to school teachers – of whom we have many in this congregation, and blessed are you for the work which you do – but the sentiment of these words can be applied to any form of daily service:

I have seen you do this. When you arrive at the elementary school in the morning, you don’t show up in a gold chariot with the word “CHRISTIAN” emblazoned on the side. You slip in quietly. You do your work. You don’t look that different from anyone else.

However, from that moment when you stuck up for that wayward child whom everyone else had given up on, that time when you told a fellow teacher who was experiencing a tough time in her marriage that you were there for her, and that you would be glad to give of yourself and your resources for her – that was when you became salt . . . You became that substance which savored a world which for another had become tasteless and dull, not worth living.

Or this, which comes from one of my favorite preachers of the last century, Helmut Thielicke:

When one Christian does not laugh at a particular joke, then that salt seasons the insipid fidelity of the rest.

When this one person practices forgiveness in a company that is poisoned by intrigue and enmity, then all of a sudden there is a healing factor in the situation.

When one Christian is willing to stand up for his faith where this is hard to do, then suddenly the whole atmosphere of a meeting or group may be salted as with a fresh sea breeze and the earnest spirit may suddenly open ears that were closed before.

When one person, in a group that is shaken by fear, thinking of the terrors that may befall the world . . . or simply resigning themselves to a hopeless future, when this one person radiates that peace of God which is beyond all the reason and unreason of the world, and thus communicates something of this peace of God to others simply by his presence there – then the salt is doing its work in the midst of corrupting care and paralyzing dread . . .

“You are the salt of the earth,” says Jesus. Simply by being who we are – the disciples of Christ, persons shaped by His grace, His wisdom, and His way – we bring to this world a seasoning of faith, hope, and love. We bring to this world the preserving power of His truth and of His redeeming kindness. But, says Jesus, we must take care lest we lose our saltiness: “But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” To lose our saltiness, simply put, is for us to cease to be distinctively Christian, for us to cease to show forth in our daily lives the sort of Christian character that Christ has built in us. In other words, to lose our saltiness and so become useless to Christ and to His Kingdom, is for us to allow ourselves to become like the world around us. For
us to become no different in thoughts, values, and virtues from those we are supposed to be seasoning and preserving by our distinctively Christian character. When our lives, our hearts, our thoughts and values and virtues are no different from anyone else — when we have become “conformed to the world” rather than “transformed by the renewal of our minds” in Christ Jesus — then we are no longer salt and no longer of use to the Kingdom.

David Brooks, in his recent book, The Road to Character, has an interesting way of framing this. He says that most of us tend to have two different sets of virtues — and that is the problem. These two sets of virtues he labels “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues”. Résumé virtues are the ones we wear in the marketplace, out in the world. These are the virtues that help us climb the ladder, achieve earthly success, survive and thrive in this fallen world. Eulogy virtues are the ones we employ privately, among our family and friends — and these are the ones we hope people will talk about at our funeral. In other words, most of us have two different faces, two different characters, two different ways of being ourselves in this world. Out in the world, we think, act, and value the things that the world thinks, acts, and values — résumé virtues. Privately, however, we think, act, and value the things we know we are supposed to think, act, and value as Christians — eulogy virtues. This is a fine picture of what it means for salt to lose its saltiness. If our résumé virtues are not the same as our eulogy virtues — if our Monday through Saturday character is different from our Sunday character — then we are no longer salt for Jesus. We are no longer those who show to the world that there is a different way, a better way, a Kingdom way to live. Let this never be so among us, among any of those called by Christ as His disciples.

But let us move on from that unhappy thought to another happy one: Jesus says that we are also “the light of the world”. And here, I think, Jesus is speaking about the actions and deeds that flow outward from our Christian character — the good deeds that emanate from our discipled hearts and heads, and which shine light into the darkness of this world. Actions and deeds which bring light to others trapped within this world’s darkness. Words and deeds which shine the light of Christ’s love into situations of darkness. “Let your light shine before others,” says Jesus, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Every day we are given so many opportunities to do something good — something kind or caring or bold or brave for the sake of others. And every time we do that good deed, whether large or small, light shines into the darkness of this world, light shines in to the darkness of someone else’s soul — and that light begets glory to God in heaven.

I love this story. It is such a simple story of just the sort of daily good deeds we are talking about, of someone finding a way in the course of their ordinary day to be a light shining in the darkness. It’s a story the wonderful Christian writer, teacher, and speaker Tony Campolo tells about a young professor of English literature who one day up and quit his job at a university in New Jersey. His mother, quite alarmed, called Campolo and asked him to try to talk some sense into her son. Campolo went as requested, but his counsel did little good — the young former professor was unshakable in his belief that he had made the right decision. Finally, in frustration and surrender, Campolo asked him, “Well, what are you doing now to make a living?”

“I’m a mailman,” was his answer.
“A Ph.D. mailman. Now that’s something!” I responded.
He laughed and said, “There really aren’t too many of us out there.”

Being raised on the Protestant ethic, I then said what you would expect me to say: “Well, if you’re going to be a mailman, be the best mailman you can possibly be!”

“I’m a lousy mailman,” he answered with a laugh. “Everybody else in my post office gets the mail delivered by two-thirty in the afternoon, or three at the latest. I never get it delivered until about five!”

“What takes you so long?” I inquired.

“I visit,” he said. “You can’t imagine how many people on my route never got visited until I became the mailman. There are interesting people on my route who are interested in literature. There are hurting people who need the comfort that comes from the great poets. There are people who read and want to share what they’ve learned. I can’t go to sleep at night!” And when I asked him why, he said, “It’s hard to go to sleep after you’ve drunk twenty cups of coffee.”

I wasn’t surprised when I found out the following year that the people of his mail route had gotten together and thrown a surprise birthday party for him at the local American Legion hall. He was special to them, and they were special to him. His mail route had become a mission field.7

“You are the light of the world.” Just by taking time each day to truly see, truly hear, truly care for, and truly serve the people that he met along his route, this Ph.D. mailman had indeed become light in the midst of darkness. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus says to us. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Simple, daily acts of Christian love, kindness, truth-telling, caregiving, grief-consoling, hurt-bandaging, and heart-warming – these ordinary deeds are light in a darkened world.

It will be quite a while before we get to it, but Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 comes to mind. You remember the story Jesus tells there: all the nations are gathered before the throne of the great King – and He then separates them into two groups, one on His right and the other on His left. To those on His right, the King on His throne then says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world.”

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you
sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

“You are the light of the world . . . Let you light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

But then the King turns to those on His left and – well, you know the story; it does not end well for them. Their mistake? “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” They have failed to see Jesus in the faces of those in need – and so failed to offer deeds of kindness, mercy, justice, hospitality, and love. Which, returning to our passage in Matthew 5, is precisely what Jesus is warning us about when He says to us, “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket.” To fail to do good deeds daily, in the name and for the sake of Jesus, is to hide the light of Christ within ourselves – to withhold the light of Christ from those who need it most. It is to fail to be what Jesus has named us to be, “light of the world”. It is to fail to do what Jesus asks us to do. Let this never be so among us, among any of those called by Christ to be His disciples.

“You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.” Jesus has, indeed, a rather high opinion of us. But it is also a high calling for us – to be who we are, in Him and for Him: to be the salt and the light He has named us to be. But it is also Jesus’ way of saying to us that our daily lives matter. That the things we do each day matter. That the contributions we make to His purpose each day, no matter how small they may seem in our eyes, matter and measure greatly in His. Our daily living out of our discipleship to Christ is of great importance to the building up of the Kingdom of God. Which ought to make us, I think, rather grateful and also rather eager – to be, for Jesus, and for this world, salt and light.

1 Matthew 5:1-12.
2 Galatians 5:22-23.
5 Romans 12:2.
8 Matthew 25:34-40.
9 Matthew 25:42-43.