

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5-6, 2011
Matthew 5:13-20

“Follow Me: Light for the World”

Today is the “high holy day” of Super Bowl Sunday with all the hoopla that goes with it – weekend long coverage in the media leading up to the big game tonight, Super Bowl parties, \$3 million 30-second commercials, and more people staying home from work on Monday than any other day of the year. Whether you’re a Cheesehead from Green Bay or swinging a “terrible towel” from Pittsburgh, Super Bowl XLV promises to be a great game down south in sunny warm Dallas – except for the snow and cold they’ve experienced there this week. I want to share the story of one player in this year’s Super Bowl (see http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2011/writers/don_banks/01/31/donald-driver/index.html?xid=si_nfl). His name is Donald Driver. He’s a 36-year-old receiver for the Packers, where he’s been playing for twelve years. He is the senior-most Packer player with the most continuous service to the team. He has been to the playoffs seven times, but this is his first Super Bowl. He’s returning to his home state of Texas, where he grew up on the streets of Houston - literally. His family was homeless at times, doing whatever they could to stay together and survive. Donald Driver went to college, and then was sort of an after-thought as a seventh-round draft pick in 1999, but got his big break in 2002 on the Packers starting lineup. He’s worked hard to get where he is, but has never forgotten where he was. The foundation he has established reaches out to troubled kids who, like he was, are at risk and in danger of going in the wrong direction in life. He’s helped countless young people in Houston, Green Bay, and other parts of both states. It’s estimated that he’s made over 500 appearances to benefit homeless and under-privileged children. Donald Driver laughs now when he gets in a U-Haul to move his foundation stuff to storage facilities. He laughs because he remembers that he and his family used to live in a U-Haul. Of course, Donald Driver would love for his Packers to win Super Bowl XLV. Whether or not they win, this man plans to continue being a positive influence on young people, letting his light shine in the world.

Jesus calls us to do the same: **“Let your light shine before others...”** (Matthew 5:16). The purpose here is not to draw attention to ourselves and what we’re doing, but to God and what He is doing through us and in 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.”** Today we continue our preaching series on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7, from which our Gospel lesson is taken. The theme for today’s message is “Follow Me: Light for the World.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of the Word of God, for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus’ words here are present tense: you are. **“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world”** (Matthew 5:13-14). Not past tense – “you were.” Not some time way off in the future – “you will be.” But right now: “you are.” I wonder if we really understand this. Do we take seriously what Jesus is telling us? Jesus is the Light of the world (John 1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35 – see Isaiah 49:6; 60:1), but He calls us to be light for the world (John 8:12; 12:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:5). We are light for the world only because Jesus is the Light of the world. He is the primary light; we are secondary. He is the original light, and we are borrowed light, reflecting the light of his life and salvation out to the world just as the moon reflects the light of the sun. We have been blessed to receive Christ Jesus in faith beginning in holy

Baptism. Through the gift of faith in all that Jesus has done for us – his life of ministry, his innocent suffering and death, his glorious resurrection from the dead, all of his redeeming work – we have died to sin and we have been clothed with the robe of Christ's own righteousness that covers all our sins and imperfections. We call this justification; God for Jesus' sake now graciously accepting and forgiving me, "just as if I" had never sinned. In response to all that God in Christ has done for us, we are now salt to season the whole earth with the flavor of that full and abundant that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10). Having received Christ Jesus in faith, we are now the light of Christ to illuminate the whole earth. This is called sanctification – growing in a life that is more Christ-like.

Jesus tells us that our salt flavor can be lost, and our light can be hidden. We can become careless, negligent, and indifferent to the treasure of all that Christ has done for us. We can fall from grace, turning away from God and turning in on ourselves. Today's Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 58:3-9a) is a stinging indictment of how God's people can screw up a very good thing. The Word of the Lord through Isaiah makes clear that what God calls his people to is not just a going through motions in order to put in our time and check the box, thinking that this somehow satisfies and placates God. If we're going to go that route, then our righteousness is going to have to be greater than the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus tells us (Matthew 5:20). This is detestable to God; it is an abomination because it detracts from the saving work of Jesus Christ, who came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. What God is looking for in the lives of his redeemed people is **"to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him"** (Isaiah 58:6-7). By God's grace, this is how we salt the earth and shine our light, when we proclaim in word and deed the good news of God in Christ Jesus. God himself tells us: **"Then shall your light break forth like the dawn"** (Isaiah 58:8). Through the cans of soup and door offering for the Souper Bowl of Caring (<http://www.souperbowl.org>), through Share Sunday for Koinonia (<http://koinoniacares.org>), through the outreach work of Lutheran Hour Ministries (<http://lhm.org>), through the servant work of our Haiti Mission Team as they prepare to go there, in Jesus' name we are striving to be salt and light for the world.

Being salt and light for the world is not easy. We will encounter opposition and obstacles along the way. There is a hard truth to letting our light shine and being salt for the earth. And so a word of encouragement here from our friend Paul in today's Epistle lesson: **"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, not the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him – "** (1 Corinthians 2:9). "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine..." Amen.