

## AGENTS OF CHANGE

Our text is the Gospel for today. From the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew chapter 5 we listen again to portions of verses 13 through 16.

*<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth. . . <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. . .  
<sup>16</sup> . . . let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you've never seen it, it's a sight to behold. Those of you who have attended services out in Vail, at our second site, know what I'm talking about. At 7:30 a.m. on any given Sunday, if you were to arrive at Cottonwood Elementary School and stand in the middle of that school's multi-purpose room, you would see what looks like the typical multi-purpose room of a typical public elementary school. Then, sometime around 8 o'clock, an amazing transformation begins. A big, white trailer with our Grace logo on the side is pulled up in front of the school and a team of your fellow-members, (today I'm going to call them agents of change. Pastor Rieke calls them the set-up crew), begins to unload a number of large black containers on wheels, and roll them into the multi-purpose room. Out of these containers come loudspeakers, and a sound board and electrical cables and a rear-screen projector. One group of these agents of change opens the storage closet and sets up neat rows of folding chairs. Another group starts to assemble a large video screen while even more agents of change set up and level heavy risers and fasten a cloth skirt around them to present a finished look.

Out of another container come metal poles and long curtains. Within a few minutes these are assembled to create a wall of curtains which separates the worship area from the fellowship area. A wooden pulpit and a wooden altar are rolled off the trailer and positioned on the risers. Round tables and rectangular tables and tall café tables, some encased with stretchy knit covers, are put into place. Bibles and lesson sheets are distributed. An information table is filled with service folders and sign-up sheets and announcements. Coffee and cold drinks and fresh pastry are set out. When all the outdoor signs are put into place, the set-up crew is finished. In less than an hour these agents of change have transformed a typical multi-purpose room of a typical public elementary school into an inviting, welcoming lobby and a dignified and worshipful sanctuary. If you've never seen it, it's a sight to behold.

Agents of change. I want you to keep that picture in mind as we consider the words of Jesus, "You are the salt of the earth," and "you are the light of the world." These words were spoken by Jesus to his disciples, to his followers, to people who believed in him. You could say he was 'preaching to the choir' when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Notice that Jesus doesn't say 'I want you to be salt and light' or 'you should strive to be salt and light.' Jesus says, "You **ARE** salt and light. It's a function of your faith. Jesus is saying that you and I are to be agents of change for the good wherever we go.

Many in the crowd that day followed Jesus and continued to believe in him after his death and resurrection and ascension. They took his Gospel message and spread it throughout Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. They were agents of change wherever they went. They lived unlike the world around them. They showed love and kindness to each other and to their neighbor. They resolutely withstood horrendous persecution. They shared the message of sins forgiven through faith in Jesus. Slowly, almost imperceptively at first, they and the message they shared, began to change the world around them. Slowly, these agents of change,

armed with the message of truth, acting as salt and light, changed the pagan Roman Empire into the realm of Christianity.

You and I are the beneficiaries of those agents of change. And if you were born before about 1960, the world, the society, that you were born into reflected the views of Christianity, reflected them in a positive light. But slowly, almost imperceptively, the forces of evil have transformed our world, our society into a culture that does not reflect the views of Christianity and does not reflect Christianity in a positive light. God has called you and me to be agents of change, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, to combat the forces of darkness and evil and to be sources of light in an increasingly sin-darkened world, to direct people to Jesus and His saving word.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” Here is the point of comparison in Jesus’ teaching. Salt was an important commodity for thousands of years. Salt was even used, at times, as money. But the most important uses of salt throughout the centuries have been as a seasoning and as a preserving agent, to prevent rapid decay. Christians are the salt of the earth. Our business is to be agents of change to counteract the moral rot and spiritual decay so prevalent today. You don’t need to look very far to see rottenness and decay. Just sit down in front of your TV and watch any one of the major network’s prime time shows. You will see the open portrayal of adultery and homosexuality as the normal, accepted standard of society. You will hear gutter language with only the most offensive words bleeped out from the broadcast. You will see Christians and Christianity and Christians’ stand on moral issues depicted as backward (at best) or the root of all problems (at worst).

To counteract this decay, God has distributed Christians throughout the land, armed with the Gospel. You and I are to be agents of change, influencing for good, counteracting the bad. We Christians have experienced what the Bible calls the “cleansing power” of the Gospel. God has taken us, who were at one time “*dead in our transgressions and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1), and he has made us *alive in Christ* (Ephesians 2:5). He has made us salt.

Salt is an interesting compound, sodium chloride. It is made up of sodium and chlorine. Sodium is an extremely active element. It is found, naturally, only in a combined form. It always links itself to another element. Chlorine is a poisonous gas. It’s what gives bleach that distinctive odor. But combine sodium with chlorine and you get table salt, a seasoning and preserving agent. Christian love and Christian truth are tools in the lives of God’s agents of change. In a way, love and truth are like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty, sometimes blind, willing to combine with everyone and everything, but lacking direction. Truth, on the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive and sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, truth could even turn people away. When truth and love are combined, that’s when you get what Jesus calls the salt of the earth, an agent of change.

The source for re-charging truth and love, the source for the right amounts of truth and love is the Gospel in God’s Word and sacrament. That’s where believers get the saltiness that’s needed to start effecting change. That’s where believers are enlightened, filled with the message of God’s love, filled with the light of truth that can shine into the world of darkness. Think back to the early Christians. Armed with the Gospel, they were agents of change wherever they went. They lived unlike the world around them. (You can do this.) They showed love and kindness to each other and to their neighbor. (You can do this, too!) They resolutely withstood persecution. They shared the message of sins forgiven through faith in Jesus. (You can do this, too!) There just aren’t enough pastors to make a real dent in the thick blanket of evil that is settling down over society. We need each Christian doing his or her part, in truth and in love, regularly and consistently to effect a change.

The story is told of a woman in London who was approached one day in the subway station by an older man. This guy had a familiar look to him and he was all smiles as he approached her. He said, "I want to thank you. You changed my life." Detecting her puzzled look he explained. "For years I sat in the token booth right here in this station. You were the only person who was consistently cheerful and genuinely friendly. Oftentimes I saw a Bible in your hands. So when I retired, I began to study the book. I must thank you for the peace and assurance I have, now that I know my Savior, now that I know my salvation is secure." Without even knowing it, the woman had, by her conduct and witness, become an agent of change in that man's life. Sixteen hundred years ago the theologian John Chrysostom wrote: "There would be no more heathen if Christians took care to be what they ought."

Jesus has this idea in mind when he says, "*You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine.*" Every single day you, the believer, you preach a sermon about Christianity to those around you. How you react to conflict at work, a fender bender on the road, your kid throwing a tantrum in public, severe illness, a debilitating disease, the loss of a loved one . . . how you react is important because people read you a great deal more than they read the Bible. People today judge Christianity, not by pouring over the doctrines and teaching of our faith, but by observing 'Christianity in action' in the lives of believers. Jesus says to believers, Let your light shine before others. Don't hide your light under a basket. Your light is not really the light of the world if it's hidden from the world.

So how are you to let your light shine? Jesus is quite clear about this. Your light shines before others when they "*see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*" The world is to be affected for good by what Jesus' agents of change do in the world — by their good works. Of course I'm not saying that we are saved by doing good works. It's by grace we are saved through faith. God doesn't need our good works in order to save us. But your neighbor needs them. The world needs the good works of Christians — and not just as a helping hand when things happen to be going badly. The world needs agents of change bearing the light of Christ if it's not to be given over completely to spiritual darkness.

In order to be reconciled to God, people need to hear that God brings about reconciliation through the cross of Christ. And if that message is going to make sense to people, they need to hear and know what the Bible says. Witnessing your faith in words as well as in actions is important. In fact it's part of the "good work" you are called to do. People will listen to what Christians say when they know that Christians really care about them, their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. But acts of Christian kindness aren't to be done just to soften people up so they'll listen to what we have to say. Those things are to be done for their own sake, motivated out of love for God, because God wants people who are in need to be helped, and God wants to do this work through his agents of change. Our Synod's Christian Aid and Relief Fund sends thousands of dollars all over the world to wherever there is a crisis or natural disaster. Sometimes those gifts aid our missionary work, quite often they don't. But this is something that needs to be done.

In your personal life, some people may be facing health problems or, with advancing age, the realization of their own mortality. Others have a sense of guilt for specific things they've done or for the way they've lived their whole lives and are looking for forgiveness and acceptance. And many people in today's world, are left wondering if there's any meaning or purpose to life in this vast universe. The gospel has something to say to all of these concerns. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus means that there is hope — not hope that we will avoid death, but hope in spite of death.

What you say about your hope, your confidence, your certainty could effect a real change. When it comes to talking to people about the Christian faith, a good starting point is to pay attention to what their problems and

concerns are. You and I know that Christ is the answer to all of life's problems. But Christ has to be presented in a way that addresses the questions and needs of each individual person. Saying that Jesus is the friend of sinners and telling about the forgiveness of sins and the peace that exists between you and God may strike a chord with a certain person. But if that person has just gotten a diagnosis of inoperable cancer, it probably won't speak to his deepest fears. But shining the light of God's love and his promises on those fears will help. God can effect a real change through you when you are the salt of the earth, showing your personal love and concern.

Being agents of change, it's more than transforming a school room into a worship center. It's effecting change in the lives of those around you, bringing the light of the Gospel to a soul in darkness, being salt and being light.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,

Your mercy and your grace have called us out of darkness into the light of truth. The death of your son, Jesus has paid the price for our sins. Help us now to live as your children, as the salt of the earth, as the light of the world, as agents of change for the better. Amen.