

In the opening song of the 1970 rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas Iscariot warns Jesus that his followers have “too much heaven on their minds.” Judas advises Jesus not to get too caught up in people’s fantasies of him being a new Messiah, but to keep his focus on the troubled world as it is.

I remembered that old song, “Heaven on Their Minds,” two weeks ago while Pastor Museus was preaching. Her sermon included a section about heavenly aspirations that happens to pertain to today’s Gospel. I’ll share it with you now:

“There’s a pretty strong pattern in history of diluting the gospel to ‘the good news about how to get into heaven.’ But when we read scripture and study the life of Christ and the community of early Christians, it’s like being hit over the head with the fact that the gospel is about what’s going on here and now, too. The gospel - God’s good news to us - doesn’t just kick in after we die. The gospel is also about now: about spirits and bodies and neighborhoods and nations right here and right now.”

In today’s Gospel, the word heaven appears five times. Three times when the word is used, it is part of a special term in the Gospels, the kingdom of heaven. Today’s reading ends with what sounds like a real “Gotcha!” moment when Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

It seems obvious that Jesus is telling us that our chances of getting into heaven are awfully slim. But even though it may sound that way, getting into heaven after we die is not what this reading is about. To see why this is true, we need to gain a better understanding about how this important figure of speech, kingdom of heaven, is used in the Gospels.

The first point to make is that there is another expression in the Gospels that means exactly the same thing; namely, “kingdom of God.” The two terms are used interchangeably. Matthew prefers “kingdom of heaven.” In his Gospel, I count it being used twenty-five times, compared to only five times when Matthew chooses “kingdom of God.” On the other hand, Mark, Luke, and John do not speak of the kingdom of heaven at all, but only of the kingdom of God. My final tally ended up being twenty-five usages of “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew and fifty-five usages of “kingdom of God” in all four Gospels, only two of which occur in John.

But regardless of whether it is kingdom of heaven, as is most common in Matthew, or kingdom of God, as we find in the other Gospels, “The basic meaning of the idea, in the Bible, is that of the kingly rule or sovereignty of God, rather than that of the sphere, or realm, in which his rule operates.”<sup>1</sup>

This kingdom of God (or of heaven) is “the central theme of the teaching of Jesus”<sup>2</sup> in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In other words, whether we read kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God, the focus is not on a place we go after we die but on God's dominion - as Jesus taught us to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

When Jesus tells his disciples that their righteousness needs to be better than that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven, he is not trying to scare his disciples into being good enough to get into heaven. He is talking about living under the reign and dominion of God. Jesus is telling us that if we wish to experience all the grace, love, forgiveness, and goodness God intends for us, we're not going to receive these gifts in all their fullness by hiding the light God gives us. To live in the kingdom of heaven, to live under the reign of God, is to let our light shine.

The light God gives us in Christ is not just for our individual enlightenment, fulfillment, or spiritual growth. It is not light turned inward. It is light shining out into the world for the sake of the world, for the sake of the neighbor.

Jesus used comparisons to help people grasp his message. Some of our favorite teachings are the comparisons he makes in parables. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like a wedding feast, like finding a valuable pearl, or like finding treasure hidden in a field. In today's Gospel, Jesus compares us to other things, saying we are salt and light.

That may not sound like a compliment in the case of salt. A handful of salt is not very exciting. Yet, in God's hands, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. With God, the common becomes miraculous. As we reflect on Christ's words to us today, it is good to keep some aspects of the uniqueness of Matthew's Gospel in mind.

Matthew is the only Gospel that, quoting the prophet Isaiah, identifies Jesus as Emmanuel, as God with us. That happens in the very first chapter. In this Gospel's final sentence, just after Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, he reminds them, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” For Matthew, it is God's ongoing presence with us in

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1 Entry by O.E. Evans about “Kingdom of God, of Heaven” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 17.

2 *Ibid.*

Jesus that supports our going into the world. This also is the only Gospel in which Jesus tells the disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. God's abiding presence with us in Jesus also enables us to relate to the world as salt and light.

Salt is so ordinary it's cheap. A standard size container of salt can meet a family's needs for years. Each year, the world produces 250 million tons of salt. When Gandhi was leading India's struggle for independence, he marched to the ocean to show the people that they could get their own salt: they didn't have to buy it from Britain.

Salt is everywhere. Yet in its own way, it's quite miraculous. It is indispensable and is useful in many different ways. A little bit of it can bring out the flavors in foods. Gargling with salt water soothes a sore throat. Salt has been used for thousands of years to preserve food. State departments of transportation and municipal governments as well keep plenty of salt and brine on hand to melt ice off wintry roads.

That's the way it is with light, too. It's everywhere, around us every day. Since Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, light has become even more ubiquitous. Unless there's a power failure, we can have light twenty-four hours a day. But even during a power failure, we have batteries to power our laptops, cell phones, and other light-emitting devices.

Like salt and light, Christians are common, ordinary, and found all over the world. Not many of us are spectacular. There are some exceptions, of course, one of them being the author of today's 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading, St. Paul.

As the church's first missionary, the Apostle Paul nurtured Christian communities around the Mediterranean Sea in the first century. Thirteen of the New Testament's twenty-seven books purport to be authored by Paul. He also, along with Simon Peter, is one of the primary figures in another New Testament book, The Acts of the Apostles.

But even Paul didn't think he needed big words and fancy speeches to light up the world with the truth about Jesus. To the church in Corinth, Greece, Paul wrote: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

This is Paul's saltiness speaking. Salt is not lofty, but down-to-earth. There are some fancy salts available now, but you still have a pretty good idea about what you're getting when you reach for the salt. So, too, others can know what they're getting when they call for us. As with salt, a little often goes a long way. Sometimes all it takes is a kind word or gesture; an email, a phone call, or a hand-written note; or the offer of a listening ear or a ride to the store. In so many ways that sometimes go unnoticed, we are salt, sprinkling the good news of God's love throughout the earth.

In case you didn't notice, St. Andrew is a very salty congregation. You share the good news of Christ to people in a variety of ways: by taking communion to homebound members and visiting the sick; by making quilts for Lutheran World Relief; by providing homeless men with a good meal, fellowship, and a warm place to sleep like you did two nights ago with Room in the Inn; by preparing and sharing food with poor and hungry people at St. Paul's Breakfast in Nashville as members of St. Andrew are doing this morning; and by sprucing up work trailers and tools for Lutheran Services in Tennessee this month and next to ready them to respond to the needs of victims of the fires around Gatlinburg. When you provide these services, you lighten the heavy burden of poverty and division for people on the margins. As you do these good works and so many more, you give glory to your Father in heaven. And in doing so, you let your light shine.

The world needs this salt and this light, and God provides it through you. God has made you to be light and seasoning for your families, your communities, and the world. Like an ordinary packet of salt in a fast food restaurant, you have a reason and a purpose for being where you are.

It's a challenge and a privilege to be God's special seasoning and God's light to the world. We are as ordinary as the water of baptism and a communion wafer. Yet by virtue of Christ's ongoing presence with us, we also, like water and bread, are vehicles for the expression of God's grace, mercy, and love.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. The good news of Jesus flavors the world with the grace of God and shines the light of God's love through you.