

**“Dissolving Christians”**  
**Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20**  
**February 5, 2017**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

One of my guilty pleasures is that every Thursday night I like to watch the program “Top Chef.” Now let's be clear, I have no pretensions that I will ever be able to cook like the people on that show do. I do harbor a secret desire that perhaps my son might one day be on that show as a chef. But I do love to watch the competition between the chefs and then when they present their finished dishes to the judges is what really amazes me. I'm always so impressed that these judges can taste a dish and discern what it needs and what it has too much of. And almost every time one of the things that comes up is salt. So often one of the judges complains that a dish could have used more salt. Now let's be clear. I don't really like salt. I think we use way too much salt in most of our food, and I almost never add salt to my food. But these judges are teaching me that when you are cooking that salt is necessary, not to make the food more salty, but because the salt dissolves in the dish and brings out the best in the other ingredients.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth. He says that we are the light of the world. What does he mean by that? First let me say that this tells me something about the grace of God. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, you should be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He says, “you are.” You are, period. That's grace. We are saved by grace, not by anything that we do on our own. We are salt and light to the world. But this passage also tells me something about discipleship. What kind of salt and light are we going to be? God chooses us, but then he also send us. We are saved, but we are saved for a purpose.

The Lutheran bishop, Brian Maas, comments on this passage, “Being salt and light involves giving ourselves away completely. True salt, salt that has not lost its taste, disappears into food to make the food tastier. Jesus' disciples transform the world by disappearing in humble service. Life in a world thus salted is savory. Likewise, light that is not bound by obstructions dissipates over miles, like the

ripples of selfgiving service. Life in a world so enlightenend is liberated from bondage to darkness.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the idea that comes to us in Isaiah as well. Isaiah's passage is all about worship. We know all about worship, right? Worship is what we do here. We come here to spend time with God and God's people. Or do we? When I was a teenager I hated to miss worship. My mother loved that because she thought I was becoming such a spiritual young man. I did love church, but I went because that's where my friends were. Do we come to worship to spend time with God or to see friends? Brett Younger who is Preaching Professor at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta says: “Most people in most churches know all *about* the Christian faith, but they get bored during worship. How can they do that? How can anyone go to sleep ten minutes after singing “Holy, Holy, Holy?” How can anyone not pay attention when Holy Scripture is being read? Lots of churchgoers know everything about worship except that it should change us. Cities in which so many go to church on Sunday ought to show the results of their worship in the quality of their lives from Monday through Saturday. Part of the problem is that preachers give into the temptation to share only what listeners want to hear. The worship of God easily becomes a reflection of the values of the culture. The church carefully selects the words that will attract crowds. Many look for congregations that offer comfort rather than challenge. Church begin to value survival more than courage.

“During Isaiah's time the temple in Jerusalem was standing room only. No one missed a service. They sang psalms—old ones, new ones, all kinds of psalms. They said prayers and gave offerings. What they did not do was let worship trouble their consciences. If they kept their distance from God, then they could also keep their distance from God's children. They did not want to make connection between their worship and their neighbors.”<sup>2</sup>

Do we? Do we make a connection between our worship and our lives? More importantly, do we make a connection between our worship and the lives of our neighbors, between our worship and the lives of the stranger we don't even know? If we keep God at arms length, we can keep others there too. The

1 Maas, Brian. *The Christian Century, Living the Word*, January 18, 2017. p. 20.

2 Younger, Brett. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. p. 317.

former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple is often quoted as saying, “The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” Is that true? Do we exist for our own survival? Are we here to take care of each other, to have our needs met and to form a supportive community? Maybe, but aren't those side effects? Aren't we here to be salt and light? Salt is useful when it dissolves into the food you are cooking and makes it better. We are useful when we go out into the world and make it better. Light is useful when it shines and not when it is hidden. We are useful when we shine into the dark places of the world. Annie Dillard said, “You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary.” We must go into those dark places, both in the world and even inside ourselves, bearing the light of Christ. We leave here, as the salt of the earth, making our world a better place.