

Sunday Sermon February 8, 2026

Epiphany 5A Sermon, February 7/8 Rev. Coleen Tully

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is telling us who we are. Most of us are used to being told who we should be—usually by people who don't know how tired we are. But Jesus is not doing that. He tells us who we are. Not who we are "supposed to be," or who we are "encouraged to become." And it's not some kind of promise that "if we become" this, God will love us more. He simply tells us who we are. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Despite the simplicity of this, this reading is very easy to misunderstand. We Christians would like to say, "We are the salt," without realizing that to be salt—to be JUST salt—is a pretty hopeless affair. There was only one person in the Bible, a woman, who could really say, "I am salt." That woman was Lot's wife, who turned into salt when she looked back at her past in Sodom and Gomorrah. She became salt. 100 percent salt. And no one seems to have been very happy about it.

To be salt is hopeless, actually. There is nothing so unhandy, and so inedible, than salt on its own. You really can't do anything with salt on its own. In a time of famine, you can't eat it. In a time of drought, you can't drink it. It would only make things worse. Salt alone is just no good. It makes fields unfertile. It kills life. It preserves death. It is heavy and it is useless. It becomes useful only when it is used, as Jesus indicates in the text today, mixed up with other things.

And I think he explains well how we should be mixed up with other things. We are not JUST salt. We are the salt of the EARTH. We are to be mixed up with the EARTH. We are to be mixed up with the reality of the life all around us. If we Christians then say, "I am the salt of the earth," we need to be prepared to be thrown in the cooking pot of our human affairs. We cannot stand in front of the stove looking at the pot. We have to be in the pot. We have to be mixed up with the rest of the stuff in the pot. We probably have to come to a boil, and simmer, and practically disappear in the process, because salt is meant to enhance, not to dominate.

And remembering this and doing this is how we can make everything else in the pot more wonderful and more succulent and more genuinely good. Christians who are the salt of the earth will not need to do all kinds of special deeds, although we might be called to do that at one time or another in our lives. We do not have to join all kinds of organizations, although once in a while we could be called to do that. We do not have to organize or lead all kinds of prayer groups, though we really should pray. We do not even have to do all manner of social work, although that is very useful work.

One of the things to remember here is there are many ways to be mixed up with the earth. That is a big part of the joy of it all. A woman who became one of my most beloved friends struggled with mental health and for some reason called the church on a day I answered the phone and said she wanted me to come and talk with her. I went to her house and she told me she had not left her home in years, but she wanted to find something she could do for others. She had african violets everywhere – started them herself. Gave them to every person born, baptized, married and celebration of life. Her funeral was standing room only. She was salt of the earth even though she never met any of the people whose lives she enriched.

Christians who are the salt of the earth should add taste, should add flavor, should help to enhance, and should add worthiness to the essence of every single thing, every single person, and every little moment of human reality we encounter on this earth. When salt is not mixed with the earth, it is too bitter, it is too sharp, and it is too biting. Salt alone is almost unbearable. But salt of the earth is another thing altogether—salt mixed in and enhancing everything it interacts with? Now, that is some good stuff.

And then Jesus speaks about that light we are supposed to be. Most Christians are eager to call themselves 'the light.' We might enjoy standing in our own light like a candle in an empty room, glorifying in our own shine. Unfortunately, light all alone is useless too. Light alone does not make you see anything at all. Sometimes light alone is used in the eyes of prisoners to make them confess. Light alone used like that? Hurts.

Light only becomes useful when it helps us to see things other than just the light itself. It is useful when it helps us see the world around us, when it corresponds to what Jesus said in this Gospel: You are the light of the world. We are to help make other things visible; to shed the light on possibilities; to shed the light on the presence of God's love. We are to brighten the world. That is our mission.

Every one of us who were baptized received a candle which had been lit from the Christ candle, the Easter candle. We received the light of Christ at that moment, and each time we have felt his love and grace, it is received again. Some days that flame feels bright. Some days it feels like an ember. But it is always with us.

We should be salt but not apart from the earth; we should be light but not for ourselves. Which means this isn't just a church thing. This is about how we show up at the dinner table, in the checkout lane, at the hospital bedside, and even in conversations we'd rather avoid. It's about being present in the ordinary, complicated, beautiful mess of human life. Not standing apart. Not

shining for ourselves. But mixed in. And lighting the way—even when we barely notice that's what we are doing.
Because that is who Jesus tells us we already are.
Thanks be to God.