

If you're ever driving cross country and you happen to pass through Lexington, KY, then I've got a church for you. It's Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, and the Rev. Michael Huebner serves as pastor there. Now, a couple years ago my family and I were traveling on a weekend, so we stopped in on Sunday. And I remember the sermon that Pastor Huebner gave that morning—he told about a class on world missions he'd taken back in college. His professor had been a missionary in Kenya for ten years, and he loved it. He loved the people and he loved many things about that Kenyan village. But, the professor warned, because he loved it, he had to be careful—you see, there's a real danger in that.

What makes it so dangerous, the professor explained, is that missionaries often start to adopt the foreign culture of that local people. They start eating the local food, dressing like a local, even speaking the same language of the locals. Eventually, the missionary might even begin to participate in local civic events, speak with an accent when they call loved ones back in the States, even begin to call that foreign place "home." And that's the danger, because before they know it, as the missionary gets acclimated and relaxes into the new culture, suddenly the lines of distinction can become blurred. And when that happens, their whole mission-work has been compromised—they've forgotten who they are and why they were sent there to begin with. The professor referred to it as "going native."

There was one guy, the professor remembered, who'd spent long amounts of time out in the field. And eventually, little by little, that missionary began to compromise some of his Christian beliefs. He began to incorporate local religious thought like animism—the belief that there's spiritual activity everywhere, even in inanimate objects. Then, slowly, more and more seemingly small and inconsequential concessions were made. Things like, incorporating the native custom of letting the people jump over a stick instead of Christian Baptism because some of them were afraid of water. And then, not long afterward, he decided that maybe polygamy wasn't so bad. And ultimately, it got to the point where there really wasn't anything noticeably Christian about the man's missionary work at all. *That* was the danger—he had gone completely native. While he'd moved to Kenya to make Christians out of the people, instead the people had taken this Christian missionary and made a Kenyan out of him.

That story came to mind as I was studying the text for this morning. In the Holy Gospel, Christ calls us the "light of the world," even "the salt of the earth." In other words, He gives us a great opportunity to influence the world, to make a big impression on the earth, to leave this planet different than we found it. When Christ preached these words to His first audience, this wouldn't have been anything new. This had been the plan all along—we heard it in the Old Testament Reading earlier.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses says this to the people: "See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?"

Before they even set foot in Canaan to become a great nation, Moses gave the people a game plan, a mission, a purpose—to be like a light to the world, a city set on a hill, so nations might see their good works and give glory to God in heaven. But we all know how that went, right—the nation of Israel would fail miserably at bringing others to the one true God, and for much of its history would instead adopt the foreign gods of other nations.

Which makes me wonder—how's that going for most of us? Have we been "the light of the world," "the salt of the earth?" Or has it been just the other way around? While you and I are supposed to make a global impact, has this place instead made an impact on us? We, the Church, are called to be on the cutting edge of a countercultural movement, but have we been the ones that have become enculturated? Are we, in the words of Pastor Huebner's professor, guilty of "going native"?

Biblical commentators have written countless pages about what it means for Jesus to call us “the salt of the earth.” And while many of their conclusions are nuanced, there’s also much consensus. Almost everyone points out that salt was used as a preservative. Until about 100 years ago, nobody had a refrigerator—so the question was, how do we keep our food from spoiling? With meat, they might salt it and dry it out, so that it would last. When the Israelites would offer a grain offering, they would salt the grain so that it would not mold or rot. And when they’d give birth, they’d give the babies a salt bath for medicinal purposes. Salt was used as a preservative. So, how’s that going—are we “the [preservative] of the earth?” Do we always give life to the world, never doing anything harmful or damaging?

Another reason Jesus might call you and I the “salt of the earth,” the commentators say, is because salt is a seasoning. For as long as anyone remembers—and even still today—salt’s essential for making food delicious. Now, I don’t have to tell you that, many of you when you taste your food and it doesn’t seem to have much flavor, you know to reach for the saltshaker. I’ve read that the reason it’s difficult to make a steak at home as tasty as the steakhouse is because they use way more salt than we’d ever think to. Of course, they use special varieties of salt and know how to use them proportionately—but it’s all the salt that makes that steak so good. And what’s interesting about salt, is that it’s not so much that it adds flavor as it does bring out the flavors that are already there. When it comes to food, salt is a very important seasoning. So, how about that—are we “the [seasoning] of the earth”? Do we make the lives of others more enjoyable, do we bring out the best in people?

One more thing the commentators agree on—we get called the “salt of the earth” because salt purifies. When soldiers would fight in battle, inevitably they got sliced and diced by the enemy’s sword. I know it sounds painful, but it was common to put sea salt on the wounds—and believe it or not, when just the right amount was used there wasn’t as much pain. You see, it acted as an anti-inflammatory and antibiotic. The way it would work is, when the sea salt enters the wound it would force the moisture out of the cells that are causing the swelling—and by removing this moisture, the cells shrink up, and take bacteria with them. Salt was used for purifying. Are we “the antiseptic of the earth”? Would you say that we’re better at cleaning things up or making a mess?

The other week, as we were getting ready for the luncheon after church, I opened the kitchen closet. I had never noticed it before, but there was practically a whole shelf full of saltshakers. And I thought to myself, *What a pity, all those saltshakers and they never get used.* Oh sure, they looked nice and neat all lined up in the closet like that, but what use were they? It’s like Jesus said, “If salt loses its saltiness, then what good is it? It’s not good for anything but to get thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” If you and I aren’t busy preserving . . . seasoning . . . purifying the earth, what good are we? We’ve “gone native”—compromised our mission—we might as well get thrown out and trampled.

But even though Jesus speaks those words of warning, He absolutely won’t let that happen. Think about it—to His original audience of first century Jews, they didn’t have the best record of being “the light of the world” or the “salt of the earth.” But did He cast them aside or let them get stomped? No, in fact, He says He came first and foremost for *them*, the “lost sheep of Israel” as He calls them. He wouldn’t give up on them, but actually came to save them. While Jerusalem was to be a city set on a hill, a beacon to the nations, God wasn’t naïve enough to think they could pull off such a mission without a hitch.

And that brings me to each of us, this morning. There’s one more thing about salt in the ancient world I neglected to mention. Because it was so useful, but also because it wasn’t as plentiful as it is today, salt in the ancient world was very valuable. In fact, the word ‘salary’ comes from the Latin word *salarium*, which was a Roman soldier’s allowance to buy salt. When Jesus says that you, and *you*, and YOU are “the salt of the earth,” He’s also saying that you are incredibly valuable to Him, of extreme worth, that you’re absolutely priceless! So much so, that He would Himself become the “Light of the world” or, as He could’ve just as easily called Himself, the “Salt of the earth.” He would rather die than let you get thrown out or be trampled.

No, He came so that *He* could be God’s Salt to the likes of us. In giving His life on the cross, He preserves you and me unto life eternal. Sprinkling God’s grace, and love, and mercy wherever He went, Jesus brought out the best in people. And by shedding His cleansing blood, all of our sins—even our failure to be the salt and light that He calls us to be—all

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those sins have been purified. Being the “Salt of the earth” for us—preserving us, seasoning us, purifying us—our precious Savior has also become immensely valuable to us! What would we do without Jesus, our “Salt of the earth”?

When I was at Our Redeemer, Lexington, Pastor Huebner finished by telling us how his professor managed to keep from “going native.” The professor explained that what helped him the most was his wife—who always kept him grounded—and his correspondence with people from home. For example, his mother would send him these care packages, with things like issues of *Sports Illustrated* and American food that could ship in a box—things like that. This was all stuff that reminded him of who he was, so that he could remember what he was there to do.

Well, Jesus does something like that. Today, He gives all of us, citizens of heaven, care packages from home. These are things that remind us who we really are—baptized children of God—and what His mission is for us here in this world. It might not be *Sports Illustrated*, but it is our Lord’s Word. A “lamp unto [our] feet and a light unto [our path]”—“the Light of the world.” And it might not be prepackaged food either, but it is His true body and blood. In other words, it is Christ Himself—“the Salt of the earth”—given and shed for you today to preserve you, and season you, and purify you.

Because you have Christ, *The Salt* and *The Light*, that’s what you are too.

So get out there, and let your light shine—let your salt preserve and season and purify. Don’t let Jesus have all the fun! This first Sunday of *Consecrated Stewards*, you’ve been entrusted with a tremendous mission—one that has power to change the world! And with God on your side, you can’t fail!