

## HEART-STRONG

### Annual Meeting Sunday

#### Epiphany 5 – Cycle A: Matthew 5:13-20

It is easy for me to read Jesus' teaching on discipleship from today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount as instruction not to lose our edge – the warnings not to be like salt that loses its saltiness, and not to be like a lamp that is covered over so that its light is hidden and perhaps extinguished. Certainly, in the absence of a living relationship with Jesus' proclamation, we have no trouble imagining how easy it would be to allow apathy and cynicism to diffuse our energy for mission and ministry. The very nature of Jesus' call is to reject the *status quo* and resist the strong pull of human nature. Doing so requires energy and vision and faith and courage. And, quite frankly, it is virtually impossible to do these things and have a living relationship with God's Word in Christ Jesus apart from Christian community, apart from worship, apart from praxis – putting our beliefs into action. "Gather us in," we sing, "call to us now, give us a heart, nourish us well, teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true." These things don't happen in isolation; they happen in community, in our communities of faith and worship; in congregations who, together, address their spiritual formation as the people of God and disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Those of us who grew up in what was once termed a Christian society, those of us who saw Christianity in the mainstream of western culture, are tempted to take the gift of Christian community for granted – because, in years past, it was everywhere. I grew up in a city and at a time when virtually everyone went to church – it was merely a question of which one. Prayer was not only part of every school day and every school assembly, it typically began every public meeting. It was easy to ride the wave of religiosity and go with the flow. Times have changed, and we need to gather as churches and congregations in order to stay connected with our faith, in order to have a living relationship with the living Word of God, in order to accomplish ministry – which includes not only doing good works, but remaining in dialogue with our post-Christian, post-faith culture, rather than allowing that culture full and final say in every matter. For any number of reasons, religion has become a dirty word in our world; and so the challenge stands for the Christian faith community and all faith communities, for that matter, to change religion's value in public discourse; to re-translate and redefine religion in order that its integrity and excellence might be recovered and rediscovered.

When I read beyond the pep talk Jesus gives the crowds in today's Gospel, I hear his comments as calling them beyond the signs of life in the Spirit – salt and light and righteousness – to the profound love that stands at the heart of our call and response to Jesus, at the heart of our call and response to God's grace.

Human love, the love that calls us into relationships of depth and meaning, the love that bids us give for the sake of another without counting the cost and without seeking anything in return, this quality of love is an apt metaphor for the love Jesus suggests will take us not only to, as he frames it, the fulfillment of the law, but to exceeding such righteousness. We can agree on the importance of remaining salty and shining disciples, but it is only a philosophical or intellectual commitment without love. Love is the thing that keeps us connected with our neighbour in need; love is the thing that keeps us wanting more whenever we experience the truth of the gospel; love, not habit or fear, is what calls us into active service in Christian community.

And so, today as we consider our life together over the past 47 years as Christ Lutheran Church, and as we look ahead to the next 47, above all, we need to remember it is love that makes all this possible – God's love for us in Christ Jesus, our love for his gospel, our love for one another as those who are gathered by Word and Sacrament, our love for our neighbour, and especially our neighbour in need. Christian communities are at their best when they are heart-strong. They are salty; they bear the light of Christ and the light of the gospel through every darkness; and they love God by loving their neighbour.

Religion may be a dirty word, but that word can be redeemed if they know we are Christians by our love.