

- Last week in the gospel lesson, we began the Sermon on the Mount. And this week the sermon continues. "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before all that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father, who is in heaven." Now on most Sundays when you come to church, we're busy trying to get you to do something. You ought, you should, you must. The gospel in the imperative mood. As a young pastor I asked my people what they expected from sermons, and they answered, "We like a sermon that tells us what we need to do to get right." Now our gospel lessons from this year come from the Gospel of Matthew, and nobody has ever accused Matthew of soft pedaling the should and ought and must. "Judge not, lest you be judged," Matthew 7:1. "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction." "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Matthew is the Gospel of accountability and responsibility. Should, ought, must. So were you surprised by the way that Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount by telling the multitudes, "Blessed are you poor in spirit. Blessed are you that mourn, blessed are the meek." Notice something missing? There's no should or ought or must. Jesus begins with blessings, blessings upon the unblest. There's no imperative, just blessing, blessing among the poor, and the hungry, and the persecuted, and the meek. Blessing upon those whom the world has cursed. What he says here, he says to all. Wherever there are persecuted, hurting, hungry people, Jesus blesses them. But then in verse 11 of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes shift from the third to the second person. Jesus turns from the suffering multitudes, he turns and fixes his gaze squarely upon his own disciples, and says, "Blessed are you." Can you see him turn? Run the videotape back. Here he goes back again, blessed are you, blessed are you. And what he says now, listen carefully, is just for you, just for disciples. And we begin to squirm a bit, what with his gaze fixed so squarely upon us. Blessed are you, when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account because that's the same way they treated the prophets before you. This little ragtag band of fisher folk and ex-IRS agents, and people off the street and women of the night, prophets? Simon Peter swatted a fly, Nathaniel nudged Mary Magdalene who let out a toothless grin. "Us, did he say us, prophets?" "Yeah," says Jesus, "Prophets, truth-tellers of Israel. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You shine." Now the Greek, unlike the English, needs no pronoun before a conjugated verb unless it's used for emphasis. And Matthew puts a pronoun here in order to underscore the "you." So you see, it's not just, you're the salt of the earth, you the light of the world. It's, "You are salt, you are light." It's a gospel made personal. And note that he doesn't say that they ought to be salt, or that they should be light, he just says they are. The gospel in the indicative mood. And you wonder if any in that ragtag bunch squatting in the dust of the Galilean hillside could take it in. What a way to begin a revolution, with just those 12 or so. Salt, salt is like that, it's just tiny little grains, yet utterly essential. Salt is not significant in itself. Nobody sits down and eats a bowl of salt. Salt is essential for what it enables to happen. Try going on a salt-free diet and

see how you like your grits. You, you disciples are just so small, yet if you sprinkle a few of you around in places like Jarvis or Adcock, there's no telling what you would stir up. Of course, salt was also used in that day as a preserver and a purifier, but Jesus isn't interested in that. He's talking about salt as essential for flavor. You, you, you disciples. Without you, the earth would lose its zest. Without you, the world would be just boringly insipid. Salt. This chapel was built over 50 years ago and 50 years ago, Christians thought of ourselves as culturally significant. We were the majority and this chapel sitting as it does right in the middle of the Duke campus, the biggest, most impressive building on campus in a way, was assembled for the American church's self understanding in American culture. We were the majority, this was our world, our country. It was our campus. Today, those of you who are younger today, can you, can you even imagine that there was such a time when they closed the tennis courts on Sunday morning and they didn't play basketball games on Sunday, even with Catholics. Where are you endangered by the stampede as you left the dormitory this morning? I doubt it. Here, even in allegedly Bible Belt Durham, when my family goes to church on Sundays, even in my middle-class neighborhood, we are a minority. And you come to feel small and insignificant. Just, just a few grains of salt in a vast goulash of secular indifference mixed at times with just a dash of hostility and derision. The other day, one of you was telling me that you had made a decision not to use alcohol in order to have a good time at Duke. And your reasons for doing so, as you reported to me, were just purely personal arising from a conviction that you couldn't relate to people with as much honesty and intensity as you wished if you were killing your brain cells with booze. Now you told me that while this was a personal decision on your part, you had been surprised by how threatening your behavior appeared to be ever, to be to everybody else. I mean people you hardly even knew coming up to you at parties and making some wise crack about Miss Goody Two Shoes. You said people just seem to be just driven crazy, but you had said no. That they couldn't party themselves if there was one person left running loose on west campus who didn't need to be drunk to carry on a conversation with the opposite sex. You get my drift? In a world where there are no values, anyone who believes anything is going to be perceived as a threat to the establishment. Anyone who has even just one ounce of self possession has a way of underscoring how enslaved we are to the status quo, so they got to convert you for fear that you might subvert them. And they know. They know just a little bit of salt goes a long way. Whenever I venture out of this place and go somewhere else to speak, people invariably ask me, how many students do you get in the chapel on a Sunday morning? We've seen them at the basketball games. Do any of them ever come over to the chapel? And I usually answer, not all that many, but fortunately just enough to get the job done. We don't get all that many students. Fortunately we get just enough of the right students to keep the whole campus nervous. As Jesus explained it later in Matthew, many are called, but only, only just a few are chosen. Light, like salt is mainly of significance in what it enables to happen. You don't stare at a light bulb. Light is valuable only in what it enables to happen. It enables you to see something else. Switch on a light and a dark room is utterly transformed. You are the light of the cold cosmos, says Jesus. And the word he uses is cosmos. Without you, the world cannot see what it is. The world has no means of seeing that it lives by lies until it meets someone who lives truthfully. We read this year of just one little tiny reformed church pastor in Romania, just going about his business, just obeying God rather than the government, unlike his bishops. Just one little Romanian pastor brought down a whole government. People of the world do not know that they're superficial until they come face to face with somebody who isn't. The world needs you, bad, to be redeemed before it can know that it has fallen corrupt, sin filled. The world has got to stumble across just one free person still running loose before the world sees how enslaved it is to a host of cruel

masters. You're the only light the world has got, says Jesus. You hide your light under a basket and everybody is going to stumble. You, light. And the world is quite right in assuming that you can judge the truth of Jesus by the sort of people that faith in Jesus is able to produce. Disciples who don't look like disciples, churches which have chameleon-like blended in to the wall paper of a secular culture are not much help in showing anybody the way out of the dark. Jesus therefore sarcastically says that salt, which has stopped being salt, is moronde, stupid, moronic. It deserves no better than to be the doormat of the world. I was in a church meeting and we were discussing sending a resolution to the state legislature, asking the state government to make all state buildings accessible to the handicapped. Our righteous indignation just boiled within us as we were busy sending directions to the government about how to be just. There was a woman at the meeting, a mother of a handicapped daughter, and she rose to speak and she said, "You hypocrites. "How many of you are in churches that are "totally accessible to the handicapped? "How many of you have Sunday school classes "for the retarded? "How many of you have a transportation program "for the elderly?" Her words hit home. It's always easier for the church to be merely indignant, to spend somebody else's tax money to work justice rather than work justice right in our own home. But the government has no means of being salt, light. It's you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. The world is quite right in ignoring us, and treading us under foot as Jesus said they would of worthless salt. If we present no better alternative to the world than that which the world already has by its own means. But the good news is, the good news is that it's a great gift to know that your little life counts for something. That your little life and light are caught up in some great, vast, cosmic program of Jesus. You are the way that Jesus is busy revolutionizing the world, turning the world upside down. You are the means by which Jesus is busy enlivening the whole universe, and that makes the little things you do, little things like the way you spend your money, the words by which you speak to other people, the way you use your body and other people's bodies, the jokes you tell, the manner in which you spend your time, these are transformed from being purely personal matters into great cosmic witness to the light of the world. We're in the season after epiphany. And epiphany means revelation, manifestation, light. That's why the music today is about light, and of course in this month beyond Christmas, the epiphany that we're talking about is Jesus. Jesus, the one whom Bethlehem star foretold Jesus is the light of the world. So maybe you come to chapel to be close to the light of the world, and in a few minutes you're going to come shuffling up here to the altar to be handed bread in the name of this Galilean light of the world. Well, does it surprise you when Mister Light of the World turns around and focuses his searing laser beam on you, on your little life, and he speaks to you and calls you His light of the world. You His salt of the earth, you His bread blessed that He might give you as food for a hungry world. He's talking about you.