

5 February 2017
Epiphany 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“No Rotten Hamburgers in Heaven”

Text: Matthew 5:13-20 (Isaiah 58:3-9a; 1 Cor 2:1-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last summer we were cooking out on my deck. This day it was one of our usual cookout fare - hamburgers. But unbeknownst to me, on this day, one of the hamburgers never made it onto the grill, but instead fell onto the deck.

So after we were done cooking and eating and the grill had cooled off, I put the cover back on the grill . . . still not seeing the hamburger that remained on the deck, and now hidden by the cover.

Well, it so happens that we didn't grill again for a week or two. But even before then, I knew something was wrong . . . for everytime I went on the back deck, I could smell it. I didn't know what "it" was, but something wasn't right. It was foul and getting fouler.

And so when we finally went out to grill again and I took the cover off and the smell became ten times worse, assaulting my nostrils, I saw the guilty party. And it was not a pretty sight. And there was no redeeming that hamburger - there was only one thing to do with it, of course. Throw it away.

That's what happens to meat without refrigeration. And in the ancient world, a world without refrigeration, that's what happened to meat without the preservative of salt. And that's what happened to our world because of sin. We stink. We're beyond rotten. We're foul and getting fouler.

God sent the prophet Isaiah to point out that fact to the people of his day. That they were fasting and being religious *outwardly*, but *inwardly* they were rotten. Yes, they were fasting but then seeking their own pleasure, and they were quarreling and fighting and oppressing.

And if Isaiah were here today, perhaps he would say it *to us* like this: You come to church in the morning, but then you go home and act as if you were never here. You speak the creed one moment and then gossip and lie the next. You confess your sins even while planning your next one. You listen with your ears but not with your heart. You eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus and then feast on the pleasures of the world. And

the good you should be doing, where is that? *Are you not rotten?*

And of that, Jesus said, *it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet*. Because you can't make that hamburger good again. And unless your righteousness goes from rottenness to *exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*. There are no rotten hamburgers in heaven.

And there is no darkness in heaven either. The book of Revelation says that there is no sun and moon in heaven because God is the only light needed. In fact, if there were sun and moon you wouldn't know it, because the light of His glory would eclipse and far outshine them. They would be as nothing.

But there is darkness here. We just hide it. We hide the darkness with our artificial lights. And not just the *physical* darkness, but even more the *spiritual* darkness that surrounds us.

And so technology, we say, will light the way to a better future. Science will scatter the darkness and give us a better life. Tolerance will help us see. But the darkness keeps getting deeper. The preaching of tolerance is making us more intolerant. Science kills in the name of life. And the technology that connects us is also separating us - real friends replaced with virtual friends, and social media making us more unsocial than ever before.

I remember a few years ago going down into an old mine, deep below the ground, and for a moment they turned off all the lights and left us in the complete darkness. And the guide said that a human being could only be in darkness that deep for a brief time before starting to go mad.

I think that's why God wasted no time coming to Adam and Eve when they plunged themselves and the world into the darkness of sin. They were not only hiding from Him and from each other, they were going mad. They needed light. A light of hope. A light to save them.

And our world gone mad, and getting madder - in both senses of that word: mad *crazy* and mad *angry* - needs the light, too.

And God gave it to us in the Garden that day. The light of a promise - the promise of a Redeemer. Who would come and do away with the darkness. Who would come and redeem the rotten. And that one was the one now speaking to the disciples. The Light, the Redeemer, come to do what God had so long ago promised.

Only His words were perhaps not exactly as you might expect. He says YOU ARE the salt of the earth. YOU ARE the light of the world. He doesn't say I AM these things, but

YOU ARE. And notice that's not a command Jesus is giving to them, but a statement; a reality. This is who YOU now ARE, He says to His disciples.

Which I'm sure raised the eyebrows of the disciples more than a bit. As it should yours. If we know ourselves. If we know the rottenness in us. *But it is teaching us something.* That we are not salt and light because we are so good, or better than others. It is not because of our righteousness. A quick look in your heart will reveal that. Something will happen. Something will change. In them. Because they are with the one who IS their righteousness and saltiness and light. He who came not just for the world, but for them. He would make them what they were not. We would be what He said.

And that would happen - they would become what He is - because He became what they were. Jesus became rotten for the rotten to redeem the rotten. He entered this world of darkness to enlighten us. What we could never do, He did.

For His was the righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. He didn't say of the Law: *Oh, that? No, don't worry about that!* Because the Law is God's Word. It is good. It is important. Instead, He did the Law. All of it. He fulfilled it. Not so that we could now ignore it. But so that we could now do it, too.

So Jesus did two things. First, He fulfilled every iota and dot of the Law, *doing* it all. And then He also took every iota and dot of its condemnation in our place - every bit of rottenness we are Jesus took, was consumed by it, and was thrown out and trampled underfoot for it. So that in then rising from the grave and the stench of death, He would bring us with Him, to life again. No longer rotten. No longer in darkness. But raised and alive in Him, and now citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

And that's why St. Paul said that in His preaching, he ***decided to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*** For that's what made the difference in him and his hearers. Not our work, but Jesus'. Not our own righteousness, not our own saltiness, not our own light, but His.

And then what is His given to us. He puts us into Himself, that we go with Him through death to life again. And He puts Himself into us, that He now live in us.

And in Baptism, Absolution, and Supper, doing just that. *His Strong Word* Forgiving us, enlightening us, salting us. Putting us into Jesus and Jesus into us. That we be what He makes us and says we are: salt and light. It's not really us. It's Him in us.

And so you really ARE salt and light in a dark and rotten world. To preserve a rotting world. To enlighten a dark world. Wherever Jesus puts you and sends you. Doing good works - which is not just doing good things. Good works are Jesus works, salt works. For He is the good one, who makes you good and does good in you. And through you for

others. And so what He did, you do. And what you do, He does. He uses for His good.

It may not seem like much, what you do. It may even seem as impossible task, just as I could not redeem that rotten hamburger. But don't worry about that. Let Jesus worry about that. You do what is given you to do. You be who Jesus has made you to be.

For as St. Paul also said today:

***“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—***

So you just might be surprised at what a little salt and light can do. What a little salt and light in the hands of Jesus can do.

So no rotten hamburgers in heaven doesn't mean you will not be there! It means that what you could not do - make yourself unrotten - Jesus did for you. So you'll be there, too. In fact, you already are, in Him. For there is no rottenness in Him. And so your righteousness is off the charts in Him.

So you can now be who you are. For others. Sharing, feeding, clothing, giving, lighting, gooding, praying, serving. For, again as St. Paul said, ***you have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.*** His righteousness and forgiveness freely given to us, to live in them. Now, and forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.