My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Remember what we talked about last week? Right, the Beatitudes. We talked about how God’s blessings were already given through those folks who were doing the work of God. And we discerned that it was not enough to just do these things, but to actually embody these things as God’s given grace. We don’t do these things to get God’s grace. We respond through God’s grace in ways that are outlined herein the Beatitudes, and are affirmation of God’s blessings and love.

And a few weeks before that about in our discussion on baptism, there is a witness component that accompanies life in God’s grace, that we say “yes” to what we experience as God’s kingdom right here, right now. It’s not enough to just think about being in God’s grace; we are to profess, spread, and do the outward actions to show the world why and how the Kingdom has come to one and all.

So today we build on that further, have these two images of salt and light. More importantly, what is the context of those images for Jesus? The salt image is a curious one, because Jesus says salt can lose its saltiness. But as I learned in my college chemistry days and as modern cook, pure salt never degrades because it’s already in its most basic chemical form, unlike spices which can go bad or lose potency over time.

But salt also has another property, with which our colonial forebearers were quite familiar. What’s that? Right, it was as a preservative. When we’re canning, curing, fermenting, or turning milk into cheese, salt is essential. And prior to the days of refrigeration, it was commonplace to salt meat and vegetables, to draw the water out of foods, drying them out and killing microbes. So let’s think about that as an image, too, salt as that which takes away the ability for something to be spoiled.

So let’s think about that second image: what if being the salt of the earth more represents those who preserve the essential parts of our life events? They are the humble, the ones who mourn, the meek, and those who thirst after doing right in the world.

What does light represent (take all answers).

Light gives us representation to the Church’s place in the wider world—a divine beacon to the nations surely gives us assurance that our good works are visible and that we are, through our public witness, part of God’s plan for bringing forth the Kingdom.

But we need to be careful here. Listen to that again; we’re not talking about the governments as beacons. Our passage clearly states that the difference between the Christian and the world of the kings and the princes must be preserved; therefore, any choice on our part that blurs the distinction between us and the rest of the world is a step in the wrong direction. When the Church gets too caught up with blessing the State, and the State blesses the church, then both parties have lost the path to God. Are we clear on that?

OK, so with that in mind, what is ‘light’? More importantly, WHO is light? They are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right. It’s fitting that this is Black History & Heritage Month, and that we are remembering the likes of MLK, Medgar Evers, John Lewis.

Let’s recall that it is still in living memory of several members of the congregation here that races could be separated in many aspects of public life. That started to change when folks began to think about public schools, when Thurgood Marshall observed the following in 1954:

“…little pet feelings of race, little pet feelings of custom-I got the feeling on hearing the discussion yesterday that when you put a white child in a school with a whole lot of colored children, the child would fall apart or something. Everybody knows that is not true.

Those same kids in Virginia and South Carolina-and I have seen them do it-they play in the streets together, they play on their farms together, they go down the road together, they separate to go to school, they come out of school and play ball together. They have to be separated in school.

There is some magic to it. You can have them voting together, you can have them not restricted because of law in the houses they live in. You can have them going to the same state university and the same college, but if they go to elementary and high school, the world will fall apart. And it is the exact same argument that has been made to this Court over and over again…The only thing can be is an inherent determination that the people who were formerly in slavery, regardless of anything else, shall be kept as near that stage as is possible, and now is the time, we submit, that this Court should make it clear that that is not what our Constitution stands for.”

Very soon after that legal argument in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) determined that racially segregated public schools violate the Constitution, a panel of federal judges in South Carolina handed down an influential opinion, in Briggs v. Elliott (1955), that effectively strangled Brown in its cradle. Brown, the court claimed in Briggs, “has not decided that the states must mix persons of different races in the schools or must require them to attend schools or must deprive them of the right of choosing the schools they attend.” To comply with Brown, Briggs suggested, a state must merely offer Black children the choice to attend white schools — and if those children choose to remain in segregated classrooms, well, then, that’s not a constitutional problem. Choice is choice and that has to be respected. Have we heard that one lately?

As anyone who has grown up here has experienced watching the Boston schools give freedom of choice, as a practical matter, these “freedom to choose” plans led to very little integration. Not just in the South, but African American families knew full well what the Ku Klux Klan and other groups might do to them if they volunteered to send their children to a historically white school. Twelve years after Briggs, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals noted in United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education (1967), the South Carolina school system at the heart of the Briggs case was “still totally segregated.”

After watching Briggs’s approach fail Black children for 12 long years, Judge John Minor Wisdom wrote a lengthy, statistics-laden opinion the upended Briggs and said the following:

“…the only school desegregation plan that meets constitutional standards is one that works...The Brown case is misread and misapplied when it is construed simply to confer upon Negro pupils the right to be considered for admission to a white school,” Wisdom wrote. He further anticipated attacks on affirmative action, writing further that “The Constitution is both color blind and color conscious”…It must be read “to prevent discrimination being perpetuated and to undo the effects of past discrimination.” That kind of courage to step out and face injustice is what Jesus calls “light”.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

When I was in Curacao this last November, we went to the resort Spa and had the opportunity to have a couples massage out by the ocean. For about an hour we had a salt spray and rub to help exfoliate all the world’s troubles away, and we were told that the light there helped the body to better process whatever chemicals we would buy to keep our bodies younger and more supple, and we felt good about our lives for a little bit.

I’m telling you this because salt and light are optional luxuries and spa treatments on a resort, and for some of us, Christian witness is something we indulge in for an hour or two, making our souls young and supple, so that we can feel good about our lives for a little bit.

But there are others who are in the teeth of Judge Wisdom’s struggle, with less privileged upbringing, opportunity, and accumulation. Salt and light are all that God offers against a world that finds increasingly crazy ways to deny basic rights such as education and voting.

It's ironic that the judge we remember was named Wisdom. That witness of helping us see ourselves in the mirror is all a judge can do. The rest is up to us. I hope we can see ourselves as willing to engage in the struggle with our brothers and sisters, pouring out salt to preserve their dignity and humanity, and giving light so that all might see the work and road ahead.

Thanks be to God, Amen.