For those of you who are not from California I should explain something to you and that is this: California is a very bigoted state. Broadly speaking Californians believe that they are better than everyone who is not from California with extra disdain being reserved for those from the Midwest and the South. But it does not end there. If you are from Northern California, you believe that you are better than Southern Californians and vice versa. If you are from San Diego, you are convinced that everyone either lives in San Diego or is forced to live with the shame and humiliation of not being able to live there. And of course, everyone who lives on the coast north or south looks down on us rubes who have the misfortune of being from the San Joaquin Valley. I once knew a woman who was from somewhere in San Diego County who was convinced that, based solely on her geographical place of residence, she was metaphysically superior to me because I was from Fresno. And while it is always amusing to make fun of the airs put on by Californians, the idea of believing that because of some odd factor, like our location on this terrestrial ball, imparts upon on us qualities for which we do not need to labor is a risk to all of us. Both Luther’s favorite epistle and Jesus today make such a distinction today, a distinction between feeling like we are something and actually being that something. James says, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Both of these are telling us that being Christian is not something that we can simply call ourselves – a disciple of Jesus must pick up their cross receiving the wisdom from above requires good fruits. Our faith must be out there, it must be something that we show forth as we say in the General Thanksgiving, “not only with our lips, but in our lives.” Christianity is not a passive activity. Certainly, we should have right belief but that right belief must stir up in something in us that wants to go out into the world and be different and make things different. Just as being from California does not make someone superior simply claiming to be Christian does not necessarily make us Christian.

Something that seems to always be in the news these days is racism. And I don’t want to go into the reasons why it is in the news but simply point out something about the idea. One of the reasons that racism is so repugnant to Christianity is that it confers upon people things which they do not deserve – either contempt or exultation. If you look at my skin color and decide that you know something about me besides my skin color you are giving a power to skin pigment that it simply does not have. Similarly, we cannot give ourselves or others accolades for simply saying that we are Christian. There must be more to it than this. And that something more is, to paraphrase Obi Wan Kenobi, the fact that Christianity must flow through us. Or if you prefer it from Gerard Manly Hopkins it must “flame out, like shining from shook foil.” It cannot simply be the box you tick when you check into the hospital.

And this is all well and good and pretty easy to say. I could stand up here and say you need to act like Jesus in this world, you need to take up your cross and follow, or you must yield good fruits as James says. I could exult you and say that we can’t just sit on our laurels and believe that somehow our nature is enough. But the question that arises is what exactly does this look like? If the ideal is that we are filled with the wisdom from above how does that come out in our actions? Naturally there are a lot of things I could list but I want to just focus on one thing today. And let me say upfront that this might sound trite, it might sound like I am saying that the whole sum of Christian action is to turn that frown upside down but please hear me out.

Jesus tells us in Matthew’s Gospel to be salt and light. I don’t want to go too deep into this metaphor, partly because it was not in today’s readings and referencing things not in the day’s readings is the gateway drug in becoming a Baptist. I simply want to point out that part of what this metaphor is telling us is that, as Christians, we are to make things better. If you have ever tried to find your pants in a dark closet you know that a little light really helps things out. But the tricky part of making things better is that at different times and different place what those things are that make life better may vary. If you are in the desert a glass of water would be most welcome, if you were drowning not so much. The other day on the Church calendar we remembered James Chisolm, who was a priest in Virginia in the 1800’s. We remember him because in 1855 during a yellow fever epidemic that swept through the tidewater region of Virginia, he stayed to care for the sick while those who were able fled. Father Chisolm took care of the poor and those who were too sick to travel. He provided food, amateur medical assistance, and pastoral care. He was even known to have dug graves for those who had died. He would eventually contract the fever and die. But the point of the story is he gave the people in tidewater Virginia in 1855 what it was that they needed. But what do we need today? Probably lots of stuff but here is something I think we could work on.

I assume it is the fault of social media but whatever the case we live in a pressure cooker of a society with people constantly on the prowl to be offended or to offend. It is very important these days to have a group to hate and to constantly fuel that hate by our chosen news source or twitter feed. So here is what I think we could do to be salt and light – we could be nice. And yes, I know that if Fr. Peay were alive and here he would remind me that the word nice comes from the Old French meaning ignorant or simple but that is not what I mean. I simply mean it in terms of being pleasant and speaking to one another’s better angels. I think it is rather a sad statement that the check out person at Trader Joe’s is often much more pleasant than those who loudly profess their Christianity. Being nice does not mean that we have to be milquetoasts but simply that we help to diffuse the resentment and anger which is constantly simmering in our world. When I was a kid, I used to get little rubber bouncy balls and bounce them all over the house. I am not sure if my mom found them as amusing as I did because the thing was whenever it encountered a hard surface it would immediately change direction and exit with almost the same force as it came in with. But if these balls encountered something soft like a pillow or even carpet, its movement would immediately be arrested and it would rest passively on that soft surface. Our society seems to be like these little bouncy balls slamming into anything with reckless abandon. In such a society we need to be the soft surface. We need to diffuse the situation and calm things down. We should be the peacemakers that Jesus calls blessed. Yes, there are lots of fruits that we can show forth but deescalating an angry world might be a very powerful witness in our day and age. Because if we are shouting at one another, it is very hard to show forth our faith this day and forevermore.