

## SERMON “SALT AND LIGHT”

(Matthew 5:13-20 Preached at MPC on February 5, 2017)

Salt! Now that's a weird thing to call anybody! Jesus called his disciples and us salt in today's Gospel lesson. He said his disciples were salt for the whole world. Let's think about salt for a moment— What do people use salt for? For flavor, yes, especially on popcorn. Traditionally in Hawaii, our salt or sea salt is actually red—it's mixed with the alaea red clay, though today you can find white and black varieties to achieve their interesting color and powerful detoxifying properties. I grew up with my tutu, uncles, and aunties, mom and dad, prescribing “Hawaiian salt” to soak in when we got hurt or injured—we frequently used Hawaiian salt to cook and flavor our food—not so much the refined table salt you see today.

Any other uses for salt? I'll give you two more used in Jesus' day. First, salt could be used as money, right—money! Good clean salt was hard to find. You couldn't just go to a supermarket and buy a box of salt. Today, salt doesn't cost much money—but in Jesus' day good clean salt was so precious that people sometimes used it as money.

Second, salt preserves foods. That means that if you prepare certain foods with a lot of salt on the outside, it will last a long time, without any refrigerator. When I traveled to China in the 1980's, due to lack of refrigeration, most of the time when eating out you'd see the restaurants food stored in many bowls preserved in salt at the back on a table—warm and salty. Just so you know, the people of Jesus' time did NOT have refrigerators or anything like them. So, it was important to have salt—it was the only way to make meat and some other foods last a long time.

So now we know that salt was used for flavor, for money and for keeping things. What does that have to do with us—Jesus' modern disciples. Well, we do add flavor to the world. We celebrate God's love for us—we help people who are hurt or sad and we make them feel better. We try not to walk around feeling bad about ourselves. We know that God loves us because God is good—that's a tasty thought! Christians do a lot of helping and a lot of celebrating—that adds flavor to everyone's life.

Jesus then says in vv. 13-14, "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!" That's funny! When I hear that, I want to turn around to see who Jesus is talking to. But then I realize that Jesus “Is only speaking to me, and I wonder?”—"How can that be?" Did I somehow fool Jesus into believing that I am better than I really am?

No! I haven't fooled Jesus! The New Testament tells the stories of a number of people who tried to fool Jesus, and they all went away with egg on their face. They tried to trick Jesus. They tried to trap Jesus. They tried to make Jesus think that they were better than they were. It never worked! No! I and they haven't fooled Jesus.

Jesus says, "Yes, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. But not by yourself! Your Christian brothers and sisters are salt and light too, and you need them. Your personal light provides light for the whole HOUSE. But when you join your light to those of your brothers and sisters, you become the light of the WORLD!"

Alone we are a small light. Together we are the light of the world! Christians need each other. Billy Graham says that Christians "are like coals in a fire. When they cling together they keep the flame aglow; when they separate, they die out." But it's true that we are the light of the world? Today so many people are doing so many exciting things that we must wonder how important we are by comparison.

The president, with the stroke of his pen and approval of congress, spends billions of dollars. What have we done to compare with that? Computer gurus like Bill Gates of Microsoft has changed the world! What have we done to compare with that? Medical scientists extend longevity and quality of life. What have we done to compare with that?

To that, Jesus says simply, "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! Believe it, and see what happens!" If we examine Jesus' words closely, we will realize that Jesus is right. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Individually, none of us is very salty or very bright, but as the church, as the complete body of Christ we are a real powerhouse, a force to be reckoned with.

A few years ago, Peggy Noonan wrote a speech for President Bush that captured our imaginations. She invented the phrase, "A Thousand Points of Light." President Bush called each of us to do small but excellent things—to become a single point of light. No light by itself means a great deal, but "A Thousand Points of Light" would make a great difference.

But that wasn't a new idea. For the past fifty years, the Christophers" emphasized the same thought. They adopted the wonderful Chinese proverb: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!" It's been a long time since the Christophers

appeared on television—they appeared regularly, back in the days of "I Love Lucy". Father James Keller, a Maryknoll Catholic priest who founded the Christophers in 1945, would speak about someone who made a difference. Then he would say at the end of the program, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!"

Father Keller was quite ordinary, a humble man, and there were practically no "production values" to the program, but it worked! I wondered if the Christophers were still around, so I looked them up on the Internet. Sure, enough! You can see their site at [www.christophers.org](http://www.christophers.org). They are still telling stories of people who made a difference, and they are still saying: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!"

But the Christophers didn't invent that idea—Jesus says, "You are salt and the light of the world!" He meant that each of us can celebrate and share God's love—each one of us is a small light—but together we can add great flavor to all people by sharing the light of Christ that enlightens the whole world.

You can see it if you look around. Christians are always doing good things that nobody else wants to do. Earlier in this century, most hospitals had Christian names. They are called Methodist Hospital or Presbyterian Hospital or Baptist Hospital or St. Vincent's or St. Luke's or St. Jude's hospital for children. They had Christian names because they were started by Christian churches. Churches started hospitals because people needed them. Nobody else was doing it, because hospitals cost money—lots of it. Those were the days before medical insurance and Medicare. No one was building hospitals, because there was no money in hospitals. So, churches built hospitals to extend Jesus' healing ministry!

It's different today, of course. Money makes the difference. Medicine has become a big-money making venture. Once hospitals started being self-supporting, communities built hospitals. Now that there is even more money, investors build hospitals. But, in the beginning, when there was no money, churches built hospitals. Christians, working together, were indeed the light of the world. We took medical care, not just to our communities, but to the far corners of the earth. Many is the medical doctor who sacrificed a lucrative medical career to help people in Third World countries—in the name of Christ.

We are still the salt and the light of the world. We are still taking medical care—and

food—and hygiene—and education about healthy living, and Christ to the far corners of the world. Philip Yancey noted that, "of India's 700 million people, only 2.7 percent call themselves Christian, and yet Christians are responsible for more than eighteen percent of the nation's health care." That's changing as India becomes more prosperous. There's no shortage of people willing to build hospitals when they believe they can make money. But in India, as in the United States, when people needed hospitals, Christians funded them. Those Christians were, indeed the salt and light of their communities—salt and light of the world.

There's no lack of opportunity. Our nation is prosperous, but there are still millions of poor people living here—lots of people in prisons—many thousands of homeless people—a new wave of foreign immigrants and refugees trying to escape to the US—there are many thousands of mentally ill people—lots of foster kids who need a decent home. The world still needs us to be the "salt of the earth and the light of the world."

Jesus reminds us that no one lights a lamp and then hides it under a bushel basket. When we light a lamp, we put it on a stand where it will illuminate our house. Jesus says—"Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (v. 16).

Speaking of hiding your light under a bushel, I remembered reading about Gardena High School in California, which started a lovely tradition in 1919. Graduating seniors would vote on a favorite painting, and would then buy it for the school library art collection. The tradition continued until a new high school was built in 1956. At that point, the paintings were taken from the walls and stored in a musty school basement. They have remained in that basement for forty years. Talk about hiding your light under a bushel!

But then, after forty long years, those paintings were rescued from the basement and put on display. There are dozens of early 20th century California Impressionist oil paintings among them, some of them quite good. They have not just been hung on a wall at the high school. They have been on display at various museums—most recently at the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles. For forty years, their light was under a bushel. That was a tragedy! Now it's shining again. That's the way it should be! If you've got it, USE it!  
Light it Up!

Jesus says: "Let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (v. 16). Note the purpose. It isn't to get glory for ourselves. It's to give glory to our heavenly Father. Our good works help other people to know God. People don't always appreciate great preaching. They don't always appreciate the church's efforts to reach out and evangelize by talking about Jesus. But people are drawn to our good works, and thereby see Jesus.

Friends, we just concluded our congregational meeting last Sunday at MPC. For all our members and those who came, you listened and witnessed to some of the great things God has done in the past year, what Christ is doing today, and what the Lord will do this year and beyond—Jesus humbled himself by dying on the cross and rising from the dead to preserve God's promise for eternal life and to light the way for all to see! God stills needs your availability not so much your ability—to work through each of one us serving MPC and this community as the salt and light of the world.

We still need a new core of elders and deacons to step forward to flavor and light the way for new leadership on session and our ministry teams at MPC in the future. We still need Sunday school teachers, ushers and communion servers, volunteers for ROLM, people to help on Work Saturdays, Stephen ministers to join our next class—there are countless ways to serve both young at Kipapa Elementary and anyone else in our Mililani community—if we seek God's leading and commit to Jesus our time, talents, and resources. There is always something that needs to done and there is always someone God has called to do it!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus tells us that we are the “salt of the earth and the light of the world”—Let your salt flavor and celebrate the love of Christ for all to experience! Let your light shine forth by doing small acts of love and mercy—Do them so that people might see your good works—do them so that we may all give glory to our Father in heaven. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Amen and Amen!