FIFTH SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

February 5, 2023

*“Salt and Light Beams”* Matthew 5:13-20

As you may have noticed, this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew comes right after Jesus has proclaimed the Beatitudes—those marks of blessedness that Jesus’ followers show to the world of God’s radical love and grace.

They—and it is important to note that rather than individuals, Jesus is speaking to the people as a whole body—they (and we) are to instill into our identity as a community these qualities. We are meant to embody a nature of humility and a new deep openness to God.

Unlike the spiritual self-sufficiency of the leaders of the day, Jesus’ followers must show in their lives a complete trust in God, in what God is doing in the world, and in the life of the people.

Rather than rely only on our own ability to build and secure material blessings and spiritual capacity, those who believe in Jesus are to recognize and personify *God’s* compassion and goodness. We are to be God’s revelation of how radical love gives life to the world, how it shapes our life together. What the Beatitudes are meant to convey is that the deep and abiding love of God can create relationships between individuals and peoples that are filled with peace, integrity, fairness, caring and compassion.

All of these things, gathered together in the heart and life of a people, are what can cause God’s world to break into this world*—“Thy kin-dom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* Living God’s word and God’s love is what can create that which shines—that which “truly is a “city on a hill,” the “beloved community,” that people may look toward for a glimpse of God’s face. It is in the life of the people.

Now, after having said all of that, Jesus declares to those who have come to hear his teaching: It is *you* he declares. *“You* are the salt of the earth; *you* are the light of the world.” This is what *can* be in the world through the lives of the faithful, through you and me and all of us together.

We are to be light and, by definition, this means that we are to exist in the midst of darkness. In other words, we need not be discouraged nor afraid of the dark. We exist to go into the dark places in the world bearing God’s light within us. Our life in God, and God’s light in us, is what will transform the dark. To cover up a lighted candle—to hide it under something is to smother the life out of it and make it useless.

*You* are the light of the world. *You* are the salt of the earth—the substance that when added to food can make a bland dish into a delicious and memorable meal. Our lives—the way we live our lives, the ways in which we show God to the world through gestures of kindness, patience, honesty and courage—these things can do for the world we live in what salt can do for a plate of food.

But there is more. In Jesus’ day, salt was also the prime means of preserving food. Meat and fish and all brine-covered food (like olives) depended upon salt to keep them fresh and palatable. Without salt-preserved foods, the days between harvests would have been very lean.

Interestingly, I have also read something about Jesus’ admonition about salt that has “lost its taste.” This is what I found:

“Scholars are now suggesting that what sounds like a criticism against savorless salt in verse 13b may actually reflect still another use for salt. Early agricultural practices included sowing salt into the earth to restore lost chemical nutrients, increasing the soil’s fertility. The salt ‘trampled underfoot’ may be a reference to still another use for this crucial substance.

In all these cases, salt is portrayed as an element that must be scattered over or spread about in order to be effective.

Finally, we must also note that salt stored up by itself was not useful to preserve, fertilize or give flavoring to anything. To be useful, salt must be sprinkled around.

As a metaphor of discipleship, ‘salt’ suggests that Jesus’ followers are also to be out and scattered about. To be ‘salt’ is not a stationary or motionless identity. To be disciples of Jesus we are supposed to be out in the world showing God’s love in many and various ways. This is our mission in the world. And if the fertilization reference is taken seriously, even salt trampled underfoot can bring new life to the earth as it is ground into the soil.

Perhaps what this means is that even when our efforts to lift-up Jesus’ call to good behavior is balked at, and even when righteous and honest conduct is met by a world that does not seem to love or care for these things, *our effort is still not lost*.

Perhaps what this can mean for us—especially today—is that even if the world around us does not seem to value justice, kindness, and humility, our commitment to these things is not lost. Rather, all expressions of integrity can still be a source of hope buried into the soil, acting silently but faithfully, restoring the soil and making it ready for new life to grow and flourish.

You are the salt of the earth, says Jesus. You are the light of the world.

This is the way we are to live our lives. I have been talking about the urgency of such blessings being experienced and expressed throughout the community, and yet—yes—it starts as an individual commitment. It can, however, quickly become a *community* disposition or the environment in which we live if we work to make it so.

When we conceive of our lives as God’s salt and light in the world, as an ethos inherent in God’s Spirit that is still working in the world, then there is hope for our future and the future of the world. When we support and nurture that spirit of righteousness and blessedness in a deliberate and public manner then God’s blessed community still has a chance, a very good chance. A very good hope.

And in fact, we do not have to go too far to find examples of what Jesus was telling us so many centuries ago. There are good examples of these things still being carried on in the world. It is more than important that we notice these things and these places. In fact, it is vital.

And that is why I am so glad that it occurred to me that we need not look any further than this gathering on this particular morning. Because, when you think about it, we could say that Jesus was telling us that what he wants is that we, as a people, exemplify such things as being *trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean,* and *reverent.* We are *to help other people at all times; to keep* [ourselves] *physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.*

Friends, salt and light are such good and important gifts, and thank goodness, God has given both of these things to us in abundance. And if it sometimes seems like the world is all tasteless and dark, I pray we will remember something like this morning, and the shining faces of the young people who have joined us here this morning, and I hope we will give thanks. I hope we will continue to do our part to nurture the salt and light in their lives, and I pray we, too, will be good scouts, good disciples, and God’s beloved community. Amen.