

Gathering in the Word

Today's scripture passages discuss the nature of personal and communal spirituality. The Hebraic and early Christian traditions—from which our scriptures emerged—see the individual and community (all-of-us-in-the-church) as profoundly interdependent! We need each other—all of us together—to be the Body of Christ at The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i (TFCCCH)! We are individuals yet we are community and family to be worshipping together, being generous and loving, and doing acts of piety and justice. So what is the Holy Spirit going to teach us this morning about us, our families, our church family, and others around in our neighborhoods, work places, school, at the mall and the beach?

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 58:1-12 (The VOICE Bible)

58 ¹**Eternal One:** Tell My people about their wrongdoing shout with a voice like a trumpet; Hold nothing back: say this people of Jacob's line and heritage have failed to do what is right.

² And yet they look for me every day. They *pretend to* want to learn what I teach, as if they are indeed a nation good and true, as if they hadn't really turned their backs on My directives. They even ask me, *as though they care*, about what I want them to be and do, as if they really want me in their lives.

³ **People:** Why didn't you notice how *diligently* we fasted before you? We humbled ourselves *with pious practices* and you paid no attention.

Eternal One: *I have to tell you*, on those fasting days, all you were *really* seeking was your own pleasure; besides you were busy *defrauding people and* abusing your workers.

⁴ Your *kind of* fasting *is pointless*, for it only leads to *bitter* quarrels, contentious *backbiting*, and vicious fighting. You are not fasting today because you want me to hear your voice.

⁵ What kind of a fast do I choose? Is a true fast simply *some religious exercise* for making a person feel miserable and woeful?

Is it about how you bow your head (like a *bent* reed), how you dress (in sackcloth), and where you sit (in a bed of ashes)? Is this what you call a fast, a day the Eternal One finds good and proper?

⁶ No, what I want in a fast is this:

to liberate those tied down and held back by injustice,
to lighten the load of those heavily burdened,
to free the oppressed and shatter every type of oppression.

⁷ A fast *for me* involves sharing your food with people who have none, giving those who are homeless a space in your home, giving clothes to those who need them, and not neglecting your own family.

⁸ Then, *oh then*, your light will break out like the *warm, golden rays of a* rising sun; in an instant, you will be healed. Your rightness will precede *and protect* you; the

glory of the Eternal will follow and defend you.

⁹ Then when you do call out, "*My God, Where are you?*"

The Eternal One will answer, "I am here, *I am here.*" If you remove the yoke of oppression *from the downtrodden among you*, stop accusing others, and do away with mean and inflammatory speech,

¹⁰ If you make sure that the hungry and oppressed have all that they need, then your light will shine in the darkness, and even your bleakest moments will be bright as a clear day.

¹¹ The Eternal One will never leave you; He *will* lead you *in the way that you should go*. When you feel dried up *and worthless*,

God will nourish you and give you strength. And you will grow like a garden *lovingly* tended; you will be like a spring whose water never runs out.

¹² *You will discover* there are people among your own who can rebuild *this broken-down city out of* the ancient ruins; you will firm up its ancient foundations. And *all around*, others will call you "Repairer of Broken Down Walls" and "Rebuilder of Livable Streets."

The Prophet Isaiah calls us to care for our most vulnerable members and people in our families and churches and in our neighborhoods. Sacrifices, study and songs are not enough – and may become harmful to us and others – if our church community's actions remain unjust and unloving. Our lives as Christians are a call and response and the nature of our relationship depends a lot on our attentiveness to GOD's vision for our lives, our Church and the world!

Matthew 5:13-20 (The VOICE Bible)

Salt draws out the good flavors subtly hidden in food and preserves what would otherwise spoil, as do those who claim to be children of God.

¹³ You, *beloved*, are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes bland and loses its saltiness, can anything make it salty again? *No*. It is useless. It is tossed out, thrown away, or trampled.

¹⁴ And you, *beloved*, are the light of the world. A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Similarly it would be silly to light a lamp and then hide it under a bowl. When someone lights a lamp, she puts it on a table or a desk or a chair, and the light illumines the entire house. ¹⁶ *You are like that illuminating light*. Let your light shine everywhere you go, *that you may illumine creation*, so men and women everywhere may see your good actions, *may see creation at its fullest, may see your devotion to me*, and may turn and praise your Father in heaven *because of it*.

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to overturn or do away with the law or the words of our prophets. *To the contrary*: I have not come to overturn them but to fulfill them.

¹⁸ This, *beloved*, is the truth: until heaven and earth disappear, not one letter, not one pen stroke, will disappear from the sacred law—for everything, everything in the sacred law will be fulfilled and accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks even the smallest, most obscure commandment—not to mention teaches others to do the same—will be called small *and obscure*

in the kingdom of heaven. Those who practice the law and teach others how to live the law will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰ For I tell you this: you will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless your righteousness goes deeper than the Pharisees', even more righteous than the most learned learner of the law.

"Salt draws out the good flavors subtly and artfully hidden in food and preserves what would otherwise spoil, as do those who claim to be children of GOD."

Jesus tells us, "You are the salt of the earth." Salt is one of the most ancient of all cooking spices and additives we add to our foods. We would die without salt but we'd also find our foods not as tasty were it not for salt. That's why in history early cultures exchanged salt as money.

For some of us today—we need to monitor our salt intake because of high blood pressure—but for most folks we need salt to live. On average Americans take in 12,000 milligrams of salt a day (or about 266 shakes from a salt shaker). When salt is used thoughtfully, it sharpens and defines flavors and aromas; salt melds and blends flavors in ways that transform bland and tasteless dishes into something complex and wonderful.

So again, Jesus says to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth!" What Jesus was saying is that by virtue of being a disciple and believer—each of us IS salt! This is a striking and out-of-the-ordinary image. In verse 13 Jesus talks about salt losing its saltiness. What does this mean for us?

For us as Jesus' disciples it means that we exist for *mixing it up* with the world: It means that for us people of faith to do our savory gospel task of making our world a better place—we need to be out there, being mixed up into people, culture and society. Jesus is saying that if we're going to live those *grace-filled attitudes*—it's not enough to nurture a strong interior life of spirituality.

No—the result of your piety must be pouring yourself out onto this earth so as to bring out life's complex and beautiful flavors! To be useful and true-salt—you need to mix into the world around you/us—bringing with us the gospel flavor. But the light still needs to shine as well! (Remember salt and light!)

Maybe it would be easier to let your light shine if you stayed in church all the time, never left home, so to speak. But literal salt that never leaves the shaker does nothing to add zing to your Chinese noodles—and likewise—Christian disciples who never interact with non-Christian people have no chance of reaching those folks with the influence of that whole new world of GOD that just is the kingdom!

So Jesus comes on the scene and encounters the tough bad guys—the Pharisees. The Pharisees took care to study the Law, teach the Law, and above all—to live the Law in *every jot and tittle of their existence!* The Pharisees also protected the Law by building a fence around the Law in the form of hundreds of secondary laws that they made up!

So one day a rabbi named Jesus shows up only to start busting down first one and then another of these various sub-regulations—and the Pharisees *saw red!* *Seeing red* refers to when someone becomes so angered that it controls them, enraging the person! This Jesus had the gall and nerve to break the Pharisee's version of the Sabbath!

- ✓ Jesus did not avoid going to houses of sinners.
- ✓ Jesus spoke openly with women on the streets who were prostitutes and the like!
- ✓ Jesus kept telling stories that made it sound like the Law was not the ticket to heaven after all!

This Jesus was so laced with grace and so quick to forgive even those who *had* broken GOD's Torah that after a while—the Pharisees suspected that not only was this rabbi not the Christ—he was the Antichrist! The formula was after all was simple: *keeping* the Law would one day bring the Messiah. Therefore—anyone who *broke* the Law could not be the Messiah!

So then Jesus says shockingly: "*Don't think for a minute that I came to get rid of the Law: I came to fulfill the Law in every detail. In fact, if you want to be in my kingdom, then you've got to live better than even the Pharisees do!*"

Matthew 5 represents a "**paradigm shift**".

- ✓ a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions.
- ✓ a time when the usual and accepted way of doing or thinking about something changes completely.

- ✓ Think of a paradigm shift as a change from one way of thinking to another. It's a revolution, a transformation, a sort of metamorphosis. It just does not happen, but rather it is driven by agents of change.

Jesus is turning the world on its head here!

Jesus sets the bar impossibly high here to be ironic in verse 20: ***20 For I tell you this: you will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless your righteousness goes deeper than the Pharisees', even more righteous than the most learned learner of the law.***

- ✓ A holy status before GOD is something we cannot achieve on our own—so GOD gives it to us in grace!
- ✓ This grace-given righteousness leads us to a new kind of life—we can't earn it! We only enter into the kingdom by GOD's grace!

Matthew 5 is both gift and demand—both GOD's grace and our responsibility!

- ✓ Jesus does say the Law is beautiful!
- ✓ The Law shows and tells us how GOD set up the Creation and Cosmos!
- ✓ The Law is the blueprint for happy living in GOD's Creation!
- ✓ Jesus says, the Law is terrific and I'm here to make it full and rich and complete!
- ✓ Jesus is saying, I'm here to reclaim this universe for GOD and so, naturally, I'm here to point to the Law as the best way to get on it GOD's good world!

- ✓ We can't get into the kingdom by our own sweat—but once we are in by grace—the Law gains a new purpose and urgency!
- ✓ Jesus reminds us that getting in or out of the kingdom is not a matter of earning moral merit points!

Doing the Word

So what is the Word of God for us this 5th Sunday after Epiphany?

1. ONE: EACH OF US IS SALT AND LIGHT OR BOTH IN THE MIDST OF CHURCH, FAMILY & OUR NEIGHBORHOODS!

- ✓ Both Pastor Jonathan and I affirm and declare that you are!
- ✓ Jesus calls the Church to *season* and *enlighten* the world. All of us are the light and the salt of the world!
- ✓ We are to be flavorful: to season the world, to add zest to life; to bring out the holy flavor of every situation you find yourself in!
- ✓ Share and tell your stories and examples of where GOD has worked through you to help someone else around you!
- ✓ You really need to do and share your stories and listen to the other person share his/her story!
- ✓ In the week ahead—maybe you can email me your story to put on our Salt-Light LOG; maybe we can put them on our church web page?

2.TWO: GOD HAS GIVEN YOU A CALLING TO DO GOD'S WORK!

- ✓ You already know your calling; help someone around you to discover his/her calling by GOD!
- ✓ Tell your sister or brother what you have seen in them GOD's gifts and calling!
- ✓ Affirm and prayer for and with each other!
- ✓ The Law is *heart law* and not-legalistic behaviors!

3.WHAT IS GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT PROMPTING AND TELLING YOU THIS MORNING AND AS TFCCCH AS SALT AND LIGHT?

- ✓ What is the Holy Spirit whispering to you right now? Share that with those around you!
- ✓ What is the Holy Spirit telling you about how more can we the Body of Christ—Chinese speaking and English speaking sisters and brothers be a more salt and light Church?

Sent in the Word

***This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine---I'm gonna let it shine.
Let is shine, let it shine, let it shine!***

On this Joint Worship as we also have a congregational meeting to talk and make a decision on our 2014 Church Budget—we can proclaim of our Lord Jesus' joyful cross—whose glorious

interdependence and witness to GOD's nearness enables us to live spacious and generous lives in solidarity and unity with vulnerable persons around us and to give light and flavor to everyone and situation we will face this week!

THANKS BE TO GOD!

ⁱ The Sermon on the Mount Series of Sermons