

March 15, 2020

The Third Sunday in Lent

Matthew 5:13–20

“Bringing Out the Best” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Twilight Zone Intro: “You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension - a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.”

The opening monologue from the popular show, The Twilight Zone. The series ran from 1959 -1964. When I was growing up, it ran until my brothers left home. This week the voice of Rod Serling kept playing in my head as our nation moved into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas – the Coronavirus Zone. It was there when I turned on the TV. I

went to the store and the aisles were crowded with people searching empty shelves for bread and milk, eggs and the ever illusive hand sanitizer and toilet paper. I went to see my mom at her retirement community and was met at the door and asked to leave. Emails and messages flooded my computer and phone from all levels of the Church with recommendations for dealing with a contagious outbreak. Schools closed, churches closed, athletic events cancelled, NO MARCH MADNESS, and gas for less than \$2.00 a gallon. It *has* felt like a different dimension.

If not a different dimension, we are certainly in an unprecedented time. None of us have experienced a time quite like this. I can't remember a time when churches of all denominations, all across the nation, cancelled in-person worship services. Yet here we are. The process of making the decision wasn't easy. The internet is full of articles and conversations about what it means for houses of worship to be closed at a time when people are dealing with great fear and stress. It is in uncertain times like this that it is helpful to pause and consider what it means to be Christ's body, in the midst of global pandemic.

This morning we are continuing our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. In today's reading, Jesus gives two images of what it means to a member of the body of Christ. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. If salt has lost its taste, it cannot be restored. No one, after lighting a lamp, hides it under a basket. Right now, it may feel like it's not so easy to let your light shine. It may even feel like you're being asked to hide your light under a basket as officials ask people to stay home from school, from work, from community events. But the salt and light Jesus is speaking of will not be diminished by the Corona virus.

For the people of Jesus' day, salt and light were precious commodities. We have a hard time relating to the impact these references had on them. Today Jesus might say, "you are the electricity of the earth" or "you are the internet of the world." Can you even imagine life without electricity or the internet? Today we can't function without them. That's what Jesus wanted his followers to hear, the kingdom of heaven can't function without them.

The image of light is particularly important to this part of Jesus' sermon. The image of his followers as a city on a hill or a light set on a stand highlight the visible, conspicuous nature of their existence. They should not be hidden from view. That sounds especially difficult today.

How can we let our light shine now? The interesting thing about light is that it has a way of creeping into unexpected and unlikely places.ⁱ

Between 250 and 270 AD, a terrible plague, believed to be measles or smallpox, devastated the Roman Empire. It became known as the Plague of Cyprian, after the bishop St. Cyprian who chronicled what was happening. 5,000 people died every day in Rome alone. At the same time, Christians were being persecuted by emperor Decius. He, and other enemies of the Christians, even blamed them for the plague. It was an unfounded claim, especially because Christians died from the plague like everybody else and, unlike everybody else, they cared for the victims of the plague, including their pagan neighbors.ⁱⁱ

Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame, notes that an "epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity." By their actions in the face of possible death, Christians showed their neighbors that "Christianity is worth dying for."

In 1918, an influenza virus known as the Spanish Flu, caused an especially deadly pandemic that infected 500 million people around the world. It is estimated that 50 million people died.

The outbreak was particularly deadly in the Northeastern United States. In the town of Rockaway, NJ there was no hospital to care for the sick so the members of First Presbyterian Church decided to care for them. They moved the pews out and turned the Sanctuary into an infirmary. Church members took turns caring for the sick, helping to quarantine them and prevent the virus from spreading. The local newspaper printed a series of stories about the bravery of the church and its members. Sadly, at least five women of the church died as result of their sacrifice. Their sacrifice helped save many lives.

Now I'm not suggesting that we should become an infirmary for those infected with Corona virus. Well, not like they did in 1918. But there are things we can do. An excellent article came out this week by Eric Wathen called "Five Ways To Be The Church When Church Is Canceled."

1. ***Support your pastors.*** And elders...– whoever has to make the really hard decisions about whether and how to gather in times of uncertainty. There is no road map for this, and there is no one right answer. Trust that the folks who ultimately make the call spent

some time in prayer, discernment, and very difficult conversations. Know that they heavily weighed consequences, including your disappointment, and ultimately did what they thought was the best thing for the wellbeing of the community. Thank them for having your best interests at heart.

2. ***Send in your pledge.*** This may seem like a small thing in the grand scheme right now, but trust me. It matters that you continue to get your offering in, as long as you are fiscally able. Even if the building is empty, bills and salaries need to be paid; what's more, you're helping your church maintain mission commitments to the community in a time when that commitment is more important than ever.
3. ***Check on your neighbors.*** Your older neighbors, your neighbor on chemo, your neighbor whose kid relies on free school lunch, your neighbor who still has to go to work and could use help with childcare... Any time you help someone in your proximity, you are living out the values of your faith community. You are embodying what the whole gospel thing is about, which takes church out of the building and brings it to life for others. This is what we go to church to learn how to do— it is 'for such a time as this' that you have spent all those other Sundays in worship.
4. ***Pray for your church family.*** And send notes. Make phone calls. All the things that we do for shut-ins, do for each other now that we are all shut-ins, so to speak. We are one body, even when that body is not together in the flesh. There are plenty of ways to stay connected in spirit, and care for each others' spiritual needs.

If, as you are checking on each other, you find that someone needs some help getting some groceries, medication, or something we can pick up and deliver, please contact the church office. We have a group of volunteers who are ready to help. If you want to volunteer to help, let us know.

5. ***Practice Sabbath.*** For some, this shutdown of life as we know it is going to cause significant economic hardship. In the spirit of #3, care for your neighbor as best as you can. In the meantime, recognize if your own discomfort is just inconvenience, and keep

that perspective. Recognize that downtime can be a gift— an imposed sabbath of time to sit still and be with your family, without the usual rush of places to be and things to accomplish. Read together; prepare meals together. When’s the last time everybody was home for this long? Talk about what you can learn from this season. Talk about your blessings. Play a game. Make something. Listen to music. It really doesn’t matter. Any of these things can be worshipful in their own way, if by ‘worship’ we mean rest and renewal by way of connecting with God and others.ⁱⁱⁱ

“It is ‘for such a time as this’ that you have spent all those other Sundays in worship.” I love that. At Grace Covenant we say it a different way, we **gather** for worship, **equip** ourselves to share faith. We **send** ourselves to serve. Right now, our community needs us to bring light into this time of darkness. Being forced into “social distancing” doesn’t mean we can’t be present and be a blessing to one another. That’s what it means to be salt and light. On the online page you received or found on our website, you will find a beautiful video from the short story, “Where Love is, There God is Also,” by Leo Tolstoy. It is a wonderful example of what it means to be salt and light in difficult times. I hope you will watch it and remember, you are salt and light for a time such as this. Take care of yourselves, and let your light shine!

ⁱ Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Epiphany. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2019. Pp 238-242.

ⁱⁱ Metaxas, Eric, **Running Toward the Plague: Christians and Ebola**, The Christian Post, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/running-toward-the-plague-christians-and-ebola-128167/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wathen, Eric, **Five Ways To Be The Church When Church Is Canceled**, Patheos.com, MARCH 13, 2020.