



FIRST PREZ HONOLULU
SERMON TEXT

“Salt and Light”

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Listen to these words from Archbishop Oscar Romero. Some of you remember him. He was a Catholic Archbishop and, in the country of El Salvador, he was killed in 1980 by an assassin while he was performing the mass in his Cathedral Church. That assassin was part of a militant group that didn't like what he was saying from the pulpit as he was challenging the abuse of power by political and other powers that were vying for control and the effects of their abuse of power on the poor and on the vulnerable. This is what he said, and was written down. “A church that does not provoke any crisis, a gospel that does not unsettle, a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin, touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, that's the way many would like preaching to be.” And then he concludes with, “Those [that is, those Christians] who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in.” And he paid with his life for words like that.

But as we said, two weeks ago, Jesus said, “Blessed are the persecuted, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Then he said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my

account. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For in the same manner they treated the prophets who were before you.”

Today, we're back into it. Jesus is continuing on the heels of his final of those eight words of blessing. He says this:

Matthew 5:13-16

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 under foot.

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.

That's the word for today. A little background for those of you who may be new, who haven't been here the last two months. We've been with Jesus in his eight Beatitude words, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, his eight words of blessing. In those eight words of blessing, he's been laying a foundation for us, carving out a path for us and inviting us to walk with him to be changed by him and to become more and more like him as we follow after him. He's been saying and we've been saying that Christianity, at its starting point, at its midpoint, and at its endpoints, is fundamentally not about what you do for God. We were even saying that about the sacraments last week, the Lord's Supper and then the baptism of believers. These are things that God does for us, his oath of allegiance for us. Christianity is fundamentally not about what you do for God, but rather about what

God has done, is doing, and will do for you and in you and through you. Yeah, it's not just sitting on the beach, not just being blessed, but it leads into all kinds of adventure of daring and faith. As you face your spiritual poverty. as you come to the end of your self-sufficiency, that's the starting place for this blessing and this adventure with the Crucified One. Even things that could be construed as oughts and shoulds – remember, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers – those are seen by Jesus as overflow, as outflow of what God has been pouring into you as he's been placing righteousness in you that just comes out and gets all over everybody. Jesus is going to get to do's and don'ts after Easter.

Today, Jesus decides to take on the issue of identity. And he says, “As a result of everything that I've been saying in my Beatitudes, you have a new identity. You are the salt of the earth.” Not “You ought to be.” Not “Please try to be.” He says you actually *are* already the salt and you're the light of the world. Not you should be. Not you're supposed to be. You are. You are and nobody else.

So, what is Jesus saying? Well, first he's saying *you*, not they, not somebody else, but you. Secondly, he's saying you plural – you each one of you, but you actually all together. And then thirdly, he's saying you *are*, not you were, not you will be someday, you are right now – even though you've just begun following me, even though you're still caught up in your sins to one degree or another, even though failures are ahead – you *are* salt and light. That's what he says.

What does he mean by that? Now, there was a Roman thinker by the name of Pliny, and he was called Pliny the Elder. He was a military

commander and a naturalist. And he said 2,000 years ago, “There's nothing more useful than salt and sunshine.” Nothing more useful than salt and sunshine – salt, and light. Jesus is using these two necessary, relevant, and useful elements from everyday life – he often took things from everyday life – and he's making a statement about each one of you sitting here this morning. Jesus is saying you are necessary and relevant and useful to God in this world. That's a fact. You are like the salt of the earth, the whole earth. In the hands of God, you are to this world what salt is in everyday life.

So, here's a question: what is salt in everyday life? What does it do? What are its uses? What is salt good for, aside from putting on french fries?

Here's just a little factoid, a little trivia: Have you ever heard that phrase, “he's not worth his salt”? We get our word salary from the word salt. 2,000 years ago, Roman soldiers and other people at times were paid in salt because it was so precious. It was so valuable, you could trade it for other things. People were given salt as payment and then they could do with that whatever they wanted. So, he's not worth his salt or she's not worth her salt. They're not worth the salary we pay them.

Now, here's my list. What is salt good for? It flavors, right? It preserves and that was very important in the ancient world without refrigeration. It purifies good things and often does that by killing bad things. Let's expand a bit. Salt actually does give flavor. Do you know anyone who automatically puts salts on whatever they eat even before they taste it? Do you know somebody like that? You know what Jesus says is, “If you are truly my follower, the flavor of your life will be as

predictable and powerful and rich and full as the salt that comes out of the shaker, as you just put that on everything and it does its magic. Salt adds something crucial, doesn't it? It takes bland food, but it adds its own flavor. It stimulates the cells in the tongue. It brings out flavor that's in the food.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, your life, the beauty of it, the righteousness of it that's being poured into you by the living God, coming out as mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking, the simple goodness and power of that becomes the flavoring, it becomes the seasoning in a bland world.

Have you thought about this? Salt needs no enhancement. You don't salt salt. Salt is the enhancer in and of itself. It's just that powerful.

Not only does salt give flavor, but it preserves, right? You rub salt into meats to penetrate it to keep it from going bad. As one commentator put it, "God rubs his people into society to penetrate it to keep it from going bad." Your presence, your mere presence, just the quality of who you are, in your family, in your workplace, in the classroom, in the neighborhood, is like a preservative – moral, spiritual, social, perhaps even physical as a protector. You're a positive force for good just by being you, just by being there. A friend of mine said years ago of churches, "We underestimate the power of good people congregating like this." There's great power in just the fact that we're together. The founders of our country knew that. They recognized that the two critical pillars of society that prevent government from overreaching and getting too uncontrolled are faith and family. Preserving faith, preserving the family unit. Just by being you, just by being us, in here, out there, we're

a stabilizing force. We are curbing decay in the community.

Now, when I was living in Orange County – in Southern California just south of LA County – years ago, I really got tired of hearing people complaining about Los Angeles. Typically, they were talking about all the crime, the decay, all the problems, and it was usually older people who had moved out of LA County and moved into Orange County. Occasionally, I would reply, "Well, you know, it's partly your fault." That won me a lot of friends. I said, "You're the ones who left." Indeed, portions of Orange County are the creation of those who abandoned Los Angeles. What would LA County be like today if everyone had stayed? If you don't like the way things are going, don't abandon ship. Stick around. Live a faithful life. Pray for the neighborhood. Serve the person next door to you. Love that neighbor. Do something about what's bothering you.

Salt flavors, salt preserves, and there are times when salt purifies the good by killing the bad. I don't know about you, but I hate gargling with salt water. Anybody like that? It hurts. It's a drastic measure, but it works. It kills germs, and it helps heal the body. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, at times, we are that kind of salt. We speak out about, take on, refuse to give into the way things are going in the home, in the neighborhood, in the community in the nation. Confronting evil, confronting sin, and refusing to back down. The world needs the church. The world needs this church to be that at times. Don't underestimate the power of your own life, of our life together as a congregation on this island. We're a spiritual force to be reckoned with. We're salt .

Then Jesus – and he spends more time talking about this when he refers to salt – he says, “Yeah, you’re the salt of the earth.” But then he kind of goes negative, doesn’t he? He says, “If the salt loses its taste, what’s it good for? It’s not good for anything. It’s just trash.” Just give it to the road crew in Minneapolis so the cars don’t slide around. That’s about it.

There is something that I want to show you.



This is a first century version of a flashlight or a Coleman lantern. It’s a hand lamp. It’s made out of clay. You pour oil in that central hole and you light the wick.



It’s little, but when it’s lit, it lights up the whole room. Just like you because you’re made out of clay and you’re little, but you light up the whole room

as you’re following the person of Jesus Christ and being conformed to His image wherever you go.

Jesus had one of these in mind when he said people don’t hide it when they light it. They don’t put it under a bushel basket. They put it on the table. They put it on a lamp stand, usually an iron fixture. This little hand lamp on this thing is going to light up the whole room. He had you in mind and me in mind. You are light. You’re the hand lamp of the world. The world is in the dark. Without you, it can’t see. It cannot find its way. You are its light. You are a little beacon. You keep the world from stumbling and falling all over itself.

I’ve been reading a book by Tom Holland called *Dominion*. It’s kind of a thick tome and his whole thing is the pagan Roman world was so utterly different from the world that we know today. The difference was this belief that people are created in the image of God – the powerful and not powerful – and of value, in and of themselves, because they’re powerful. Every life matters. He says that everything in the modern Western world – even the complaints of the atheists against the idea of a Christian God, which are usually moral complaints, even the most radical, progressive, utterly woke craziness – it all finds its roots in a Christian worldview. Everything is really Christian deep down in the West. The Christian revolution has been that powerful. What it wants for people, what it wants for the poor, no one argues with that anymore. In the Roman world, the poor, they were to be used. Expose children you didn’t want. Just leave them outside. Christians picked them up. Christians went into the garbage dumps where bodies were dumped, and they would take them out and give them a proper burial. This is what won the world over. As one thinker said, “Christianity

out-thought and it out-loved the Roman world and took it over.”

Do you believe that we are that powerful just by being who we are, that we're salt in light? Do you believe that about yourself, about this church? A handful of uneducated, powerless (so to speak), Jewish, working-class people, believed that 2,000 years ago, and they changed the world. Do you think that you're salty enough? Some of you have rather salty tongues. There's a place for that at times, isn't there, when you're trying to get somebody's attention to knock it off? Do you believe you're salty enough, that you're bright enough?

Let me show you another image.



There was a no-name pro. He was so no-name, I forgot his name, but this is a true story. My pastor of my youth told me this story. He was struggling in his career, struggling in making a living. He was frustrated. He and his wife were watching the TV the day before the big tournament and they were listening to the description of the prize money and how winning would affect the standing of the winner in the ranks in the PGA. She turned to him and she said, “Why can't that be you?” She believed in him and he decided to believe in him.

He went out and, at the end of three days, to everybody's surprise, he won that tournament.

So much of life is decided right up here in the mind and, for Jesus people, not believing in who Jesus says you are, not believing in what God can do, what He has done, is doing, and will do, through you – brothers and sisters, listen – you'll never be agents of change in your own life, let alone in Hawaii and beyond, until you start believing what Jesus Christ says about you, that you are the salt of the earth, that you are the light of the world.

Back to this handful of Jewish working people – fishermen, farmers, tax collectors. I was sitting with a new Christian about five years ago in a previous church, and we were thinking out loud about how it was possible that the two of us would be sitting and talking about Jesus 20 centuries after this whole thing got started. As we were sitting on a continent that was yet to be known by the people that we read about in the New Testament – he, with a German last name; I, with an English last name – how is it possible, drawing a line from this group of people in the story, in the heart of the Middle East on that mountainside 2,000 years ago, to our pagan ancestors wandering around the forests of Britain and Northern Europe 1,000 years ago, maybe earlier, sometime in the medieval period, at some point being evangelized and made followers of Jesus by followers of Jesus, who at great cost and sacrifice came and brought the good news to our ancestors. Then, from there to this gathering of believers in Southern California where we were both worshiping in the 21st century. The whole story of how that first message got from those ancient hearts into our hearts, across the globe and through the centuries, it must be incredible if we only knew the details of it, the

sacrifice, the decisions, the cost, the blessing, the influence.

At the earliest hint of this worldwide movement, this phenomenon Jesus is unleashing, it's right here that the line begins, right here in the passage today, not with the Great Commission. It starts right here. Our God is a missionary God and he has a heart that beats for lost people. It was not "You must decide to be the light." The decision had already been made for them. "You *are* the light." And they took it seriously. So, as every person in that line leading from way back then to here on these islands today, how on earth did you get here as a Christian? Now you're the light and your decision is to take that seriously to be who you are. What a high view of you. Let me say it another way: What a high view of the church. What a vision for the church.

This is a Christ-centered lesson in self esteem for the poor in spirit, as one writer put it. Jesus said of himself at one point in the Gospel of John, "I am the light of the world." He said that of himself. But then he said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And you do. You have it in yourself now. In this Sermon on the Mount, right up front, Jesus ordains you. He commissions you. He authorizes you to be a world force, you, His Church, the light of the world.

The Roman orator Cicero said of Rome – the city and the civilization – a century before Christ, "It's a light to the whole world." That was a well-known saying. Rome and its culture has been, with its language, its law, its art, its architecture, its leaders, and literature. People still look to it, seek understanding from it, and are guided by it.

And America has been likened to a shining city on a hill. Lincoln said something like that. Others have said that. Many have looked to us, and still do. America, at its best, is an idea and a promise – when it's at its best.

Nations and civilizations come and go, but the people of Jesus remain to the end. Wherever they're found across the globe, and through the centuries, we are our own city, and it's impossible to be hidden, and everybody is looking at us. Let your light so shine before others that they see your good works, and give glory to your Father who's in heaven. That's it.

We have some homework, as always. At the bottom of this document is what I want you to do this week.

Let me pray for us.

Father, it's amazing what you've done in this world through normal people, through some heroes, but not really superstars. It's more the common rank and file, plain vanilla, without topping, followers of you who have loved their neighbors and transform what we take for granted, that even those who are perceived to be the enemies of the gospel would begrudgingly not like the fact that they have Christianity to thank for the ideas that they have. Lord, help us to be salt and light, whatever that looks like, in the next seven days. Help us to do our spiritual steps and keep being whom you've decided and ordained us and commissioned us and authorized us to be: salt and light. In the name of Jesus we pray this. Amen.

SPIRITUAL STEPS OF THE WEEK:

1. Read Matthew 5:13-16 slowly three times in one sitting, once a day (maybe out loud).
2. Make a written or mental note of what seems to:
 - get your attention;
 - sparkle;
 - or perhaps not sit well with you.
3. Ask God to speak to you about what you made a note of.
4. Ask God to help you believe and take seriously your identity in Him as “salt” and “light” wherever you find yourself.