



Sermon of November 7, 1999



Rev. Craig Dorval

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

"DON'T HOLD BACK!"

Matthew 5:13-20

Isaiah 58:1-9a

The sermon title this morning comes from the majestic open to Isaiah 58, which announces the desire of God for compassion and justice: "Shout out, do not hold back!" Do not hold back in living a life filled with compassion and justice.

If we ever need a lesson in not holding back, my suggestion is that we turn to our children. They are experts in not holding back. A teacher would regularly give her first-grade class a test, a sort of fill-in-the-blank test for many common expressions. Such as "here today, gone ___, Here today, gone tomorrow. As she gave this test, she discovered that she rarely got the expected answer. For example,

Strike While The... Bug Is Close.

Don't Bite The Hand That... Looks Dirty.

Don't Put Off To Tomorrow What... You Put On To Go To Bed.

Two's Company, Three's... The Musketeers.

Laugh And The Whole World Laughs With You, Cry And... You Have To Blow Your Nose.

It's Always Darkest Before... Daylight Savings Time.

On this early- February morning, we're in that dark time before Daylight Savings Time. This is

a time of year when many people get sick, and I know that some of our church members or their friends or loved ones are down with colds or flu. In a lot of ways, this can be a hard time of year. We move from the celebration of Christmas and New Year's to a lull of a few weeks, to what has become a secular holiday--the Super Bowl.

Then to another lull through Lent, then to Easter, Spring, Memorial Day and summer. So this is an in-between time. And it's been cold and rainy this week. And we're in standard time, so it gets dark early. It can be a hard time of year. Let's all just take a nap.

With darkness prevalent, it may seem a little strange that our text for today is this well-known passage from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: "you are the light of the world"--and "you are the salt of the earth." Two of the great metaphors from the New Testament.

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

Salt and light. An easy way to get a handle on the first part of this passage is to remember how we know if something is salt. There's an unlabeled box in your kitchen cabinet. You think the substance inside is salt. How do you find out for sure? You taste it. Salt is defined by tasting salty. If it stops tasting salty, it is no longer salt. The salty taste gives salt its identity. Salt here is a symbol. Saltiness defines salt; a loving attitude of compassion and justice defines disciples.

A word about attitude... Medical science has shown the influence that attitude has on susceptibility to disease, especially bacterial infection. People who are cheerful, giving and upbeat are less prone to illness than those who are consistently grumpy malcontents. Rev. Tony Bellarimo puts it this way: The surly bird gets the germ.

Salt is not a luxury but essential to life. Just as God's relationship with us is essential to our lives. At least to our authentic and joyful lives. Lives in which we let our light shine.

Mrs. Gray was a houseparent at a group-care home for teenagers in Salem, Virginia. I got a chance to know her in the 1970s. Mrs. Gray was 70 years old, five feet tall and spoke with a gentle English accent. She loved opera and carried her cassette player all over the house as she did chores.

The kids adored her, and respected her. There was absolutely no doubt about who was in charge. If one of the boys got out of line, she would let him know very quickly, and with absolute certainty. It was a fascinating sight to see her dress down one of these boys, twice her size. She didn't take any nonsense. There was respect, and there was always love. She was a woman of great faith--in people and in God. She had lived a full life--raised a large family. She could have just enjoyed her retirement. But there was this place for her, and this important work for her to do. She was a light. Those around her could see clearly what was good about life. What was important in life. And God's presence with us.

We all know or have known people like this. Some are famous, though most are not. Mother Theresa was called to work with the unwanted, the homeless on the streets of Calcutta. We look at her and we say "how can I ever do what she does? She must have a special gift."

Yes it's a special gift. And we all have it. Matthew has Jesus addressing the disciples and the crowd. "You are the light of the world." It's not "you should be the light of the world" or "go be the light of the world"--it is "you ARE the light of the world." "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."

Mother Theresa was often asked, "How can we ordinary people go about doing what you do? I mean, your work has meant so much and is really changing the world." She said love your family. Be kind to people you see every day! Your co-workers, the cashier in the grocery store, your next-door neighbor.

Sometimes we are embarrassed or uncomfortable being kind. We think it's a signal to people that we are gullible or weak. It's like saying, if we don't hide the light, it might go out. We think that we might actually lose the light if we expose it or share it. When we let our light shine, when we make ourselves vulnerable for the sake of another human being, we take a risk.

The risk of living fully and completely--of letting our light shine--makes us uncomfortable and sometimes even afraid. We ask ourselves "what am I going to do if I don't find a spouse, a house, a job, a friend, a benefactor?" "What am I going to do if I get fired, if I get sick, if an accident happens, if I lose my friends, if my marriage does not work out?" "What if someone steals my money, breaks into my house, or hurts me?" "How can I raise children in this world that seems so unsafe?" "How can I succeed on my own as an adult?" "How can I keep my good name among my neighbors?" "How can I make it to heaven?"

The writer Henri Nouwen, in his book *Lifesigns*, refers to this as a network of anxious questions, which surrounds us and begins to control many--or most--of our decisions. So much so that we cease to be conscious of how we are making decisions. When we run our lives based on these anxious questions, we are always seeking safety and security. We are in what CS Lewis called the shadowlands.

The theme of that book and movie is that we should not live our lives in the shadowlands, believing the sun is shining brighter somewhere else, but should live boldly where we are. Because we are the light of the world. It says it right here in Matthew. This is big, because it says in the 14th verse. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid." What we have, what is in us, has such potential to alter the world, to change the world, to bring fulfillment and happiness where there is emptiness and despair, it cannot be hidden. "Let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to God." So that we all may come to know God's presence with us, and that life is a very good and precious gift.

Author Timothy Brown tells of a visit he made to a hospital a few years ago. He was there to visit a young man from Spring Lake, Michigan, who was in the later stages of leukemia. Because he was so weakened, Brown knelt next to his bed to look at him eyeball to eyeball. He said quietly, "Hi, Tim," and the young man said, "Hi, Tim." There followed an awkward silence as Brown tried to think of something to say.

Finally, the young man broke the deafening silence by saying gently, "I have learned something." "I have learned that life isn't like a VCR." Perplexed, Brown said, "I don't get it. What do you mean?" He said, drawing his next breath in pain, "Life isn't like a VCR -- you can't fast-forward past the bad parts."

As Brown knelt next to the bed, trying to take this all in, there was another pause. Then the young man said, "You know what else I learned?" Brown said, "No, I really don't. Please tell me." "I have learned," he whispered, "that God is in every frame, and right now it's just enough."

We are the light of the world. There is a wonderful carol, composed in 1983 by David Hurd and Richard Wilbur, in the Episcopal hymnal. It goes like this:

A stable lamp is lighted
Whose glow shall wake the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.

And African-American theologian Howard Thurman said: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Don't hold back! For God accepts us just as we are. And we are the light of the world. Let's pray.

Gracious God, as we seek to live lives of light and peace, guide us, so that we show the clarity and warmth of your salvation. As we move from worship this morning, we are mindful that you accept us and love us, just as we are. And, once more, we come. Amen.

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