

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 8, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12 & Matthew 5:13-20

Theme: Glory Revealed: Call to Action

[prayer]

This week I joined other Methodist clergy in listening to a local colleague reflect on what he learned after answering a call to join the recent mass mobilization in Minneapolis. Clergy have a long history of acting as peacekeepers in protest movements and I was curious to hear this man's perspective. An estimated seven hundred faith leaders converged on the city in late January; they included Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics, evangelicals, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists. Some came to serve as legal observers of law enforcement. Others came to deliver food to immigrants who are too afraid to leave their homes. A few were boarding flights home when the news broke that Alex Pretti had been shot and killed; they immediately got off their planes to see how they could help. Another one hundred were arrested at the Minneapolis airport in an act of mass civil disobedience.¹

The scale of the mobilization in Minneapolis is impressive...and overwhelming. As I listened, I thought to myself, *These people are much braver than I am. I couldn't do all of that.* And then, as if he could read my mind, the speaker paused and said, "We all must do our part to bear witness. But it is important to remember that you aren't called to do it all. Be clear on what you identify as your role in addressing injustice."

So, I took a deep breath, and I have been doing just that. And as I pray, I keep coming back to Jesus's teaching on being salt and light.

This teaching is a continuation of last week's Beatitudes. Both are part of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon isn't about God; it's about us. It describes the

¹ <https://www.umnews.org/news/us-pastors-stand-against-federal-crackdown>

new community that Jesus is forming in His name. When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” the “you” is plural; he is addressing the people gathered before him, people who are suffering under an abusive economic, political, and religious system. The sentence is also indicative. Jesus is not commanding; he is describing. He is not ordering the community to *be* salt and light; he is telling them they already *are*. These are people who feel powerless to address the injustice in their midst, and yet Jesus is telling them that God has profoundly blessed them for the work of ushering in God’s kingdom. Jesus gives them dignity where empire does not.

When Jesus says, “You are salt; you are light,” he is saying to us “Be what you already are.” And what we are is evangelists for the upside-down kingdom of God, where mourners are comforted, the hungry are fed, and the poor inherit the earth. The natural property of salt is enhancing flavor and preserving food; the natural property of light is illuminating darkness. And the natural property of disciples is sharing the Good News of God’s kingdom come.

Sharing the Good News requires action. Too many people think the essence of Christianity is “believing in Jesus.” But for Jesus, belief and action are inseparable. The essence of Christianity – the saltiness of salt – is loving your neighbor. This is how you demonstrate your belief in God. The Sermon on the Mount is a call to do just that – to demonstrate our belief in God by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

In our reading from Isaiah, we hear the prophet also call God’s people to action. He describes this call to action as a fast. Traditionally, fasting is a form of physical sacrifice – setting aside the demands of our flesh so we can give our full attention to God. But the fast Isaiah describes is not about depriving ourselves but instead about promoting communal flourishing. Isaiah accuses the nation of Israel, particularly the economic and political elite, of hiding God’s light under a bushel of injustice and selfishness. He calls for them to fast from injustice and practice mercy and generosity. The Message translation puts it pretty plainly:

“This is the kind of fast day I’m after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I’m interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad...Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at

once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'" (Isa 58:6-9)

The CEB Study Bible offers this summary of this text, "Devout rituals are meaningless when accompanied by self-serving practices. But fasting from injustice and actively pursuing the interests of those who are socially defenseless—the hungry, oppressed, naked, and homeless—benefits the whole society."

This has always been God's definition of right religion, handed down to us through the Law and the Prophets. God desires a world built upon mercy and justice, where the weakest among us are protected and lifted up. God calls God's people to extend the blessings of his kingdom to that end. And God sent His Son to show us the way. Jesus came not to overturn the Law and Prophets, but to fulfill them. Fulfillment means embodying the Law and Prophets, incarnating them, bringing them to life. With his life and ministry Jesus showed us the weightier matters by which our religion will be judged.

As followers of Jesus, we live our lives exposed, out in the open. "A city on a hill cannot be hid." Our witness always matters. We represent Jesus everywhere and to everyone. When we ignore our witness, when our faith does not take the shape of mercy and justice in the world, then we stop being salt and light.

A colleague, the Rev. Laura Rockville Beville, wrote this this week: "In more settings and spaces than I can count, I've found myself reminding people to be kind. Reminding them that love of neighbor is not optional. That for Christians, it is not a political stance or a personality trait—it is our highest priority. Injustice doesn't happen because some people are bad and others are good. It happens when systems forget our shared humanity. When we advocate for dignity, justice, and compassion—we are not being political. We are being baptismal."²

In our United Methodist baptismal vows, we accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We also pledge to participate in the ministry of the Church – the ministry of Christ – through our prayers, presence, gifts, service...and our witness.

² <https://www.parsonspretties.com/post/listening-to-the-body>

The last time I preached on this text, three years ago in a very different context, I shared a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. He wrote,

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

These are the words we dimly hear:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.*

*Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*³

Our witness in this moment matters, friends. What will our witness be? How will we flare up and make big shadows for God to move in?

The man who shared his experience in Minneapolis this week spoke eloquently about witnessing neighbors showing up for their neighbors in simple but profound ways. Even a little light can cast a long shadow, and a little bit of salt can add a lot of flavor to a meal. Like salt and light, God made us as little things that can make a big difference. God has blessed us with gifts that can bless the world. But we do have to discern and embrace and utilize those gifts.

Some of you have asked me, *Pastor, what can I do in the face of all the cruelty I see?* My answer is this: Start with what you are already good at. If you are a prayer warrior, devote yourself to interceding for our leaders and for those who are suffering and in need. If you are good at feeding people, pray with your hands and feed them. If you are good at marching and peacefully protesting, pray with your feet and show up for those who cannot. Identify how you will be part of resisting injustice and then *just do it*. Don't just use your voice; use your life.

Be the salt and light you already are. Amen.

³ <https://onbeing.org/poetry/go-to-the-limits-of-your-longing/>