

250 Bearing Witness in MPK

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Bearing Witness in MPK", originally shared on February 3, 2023. It was the 250th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

What do road construction, home lighting, and entering the Reign of God tell us about how to live as Christians in a time of violence and decline in a pluralistic religious environment? Today, we're going to find out.

Sally and I were at the grocery store, loading our car, the other day when I saw an elderly white-haired woman pass behind me to load her car. We both finished loading at about the same time so I thought, "I'll do something nice for the senior citizen," and I turned to offer to take her cart back to the stall?" when she said, "May I take your cart back to the stall?"

Today, we will hear from Jesus how little things can have a big effect and that when we think we are in control, it is often we who need the most help.

We are now almost two weeks from the mass shooting in Monterey Park, on January 21st. I visited the location at the Star Dance Studio this week. There have been dozens of other mass shootings since then. We have seen a variety of religious and political groups holding public vigils.

What is the current environment for sharing what our faith has made us to be?

Well, on the one hand, it's kind of chilly.

We are living in times when there are many religions all around us as well as an increasing number of people with none at all.

We are living in increasingly secular times. We are living in times where many people believe that all religion is basically the same, that religion is something that human beings make up in order to answer the questions they can't answer for themselves. And when those questions are answered, then who needs God?

We live in times when growing numbers of people have never gone to church, never had any proper Christian education, don't know a Christian, and who have gotten all their impressions of the Christian Church from popular media. And what does all of this add up to for them? Who needs God?

We live in times when people believe that they are self-sufficient because they have enough money or power or education or status in the world to feel secure. They think that those things will last, so who needs God?

We live in times when people are very tolerant of others as long as others conform to their beliefs and values, particularly on social media and in politics. And if those two statements seem contradictory, they are. What are our common values as a civilization? They are pretty hard to find. And, when we don't think we need common values, who needs God?

So, on the one hand, our current environment is kind of chilly. But, on the other hand, people are asking the hard questions like "How could God allow this to happen?" and "Where is God in my suffering?" that require salt and light and the good news of Jesus Christ to answer.

The early Christians in New Testament times and a bit beyond lived under the Roman Empire. As in our society, there were many religions represented within the Empire.

The Romans themselves believed in many gods. Almost all the people they conquered and occupied believed in many gods.

And the Romans couldn't care less about what people believed, as long as they believed that everybody else's beliefs were just as true as their own. They needed that in order to maintain order within the empire. No one was allowed to say that what they believed was true. Only that it was *their* truth.

People could believe in as many gods as they wanted as long as they said that everybody else's gods were just as real. The Empire didn't want to have to use their troops to maintain order within the empire. Troops were needed for border defense and for expansion.

And, as the glue to keep everything together, the empire declared that the Roman emperor was a god to provide a point of common worship among all the conquered people of the empire.

Christians and Jews said, "No. There is only one God." And both groups were persecuted for their intolerance. Christians were persecuted a little more because the Romans valued the veneration of ancestors and, while Christians saw Jesus as having fulfilled the promises given to their ancestors, the Romans saw them as having rejected the religion of their Jewish ancestors.

Christians and Jews weren't persecuted for their faith. They were persecuted for their intolerance.

How do we live as Christians in a time of violence and decline in a pluralistic religious environment?

Last week we spoke about what the Christian faith has to say to the evil we saw in the mass shootings at Monterey Park, where I am serving regularly but very part time.

This week, we are going to speak about what Christians have to say about maintaining our integrity in a way that bears witness to our faith, and about preventing the violence from repeating itself.

The Bible reading that we're looking at today begins with an answer from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 5:13-20**, it begins,

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.

Salt was mined from the earth in the time of Jesus' public ministry. Salt, or "sodium chloride", cannot lose its saltiness, but it can be corrupted in the mining process. The Romans used that corrupted salt as road construction material. It was thrown out and trampled underfoot.

In the same way, we have the treasure of the Gospel given to us in Jesus Christ. We give our testimony to it every time we say one of the historic creeds together in worship. No one else is sharing this good news but us. All the good we do in the world comes as a product of who we are in Jesus Christ. It is a natural response. But if we are founded and focused on something else, if we allow ourselves to be corrupted by the culture around us, we slowly become a human tradition-protecting society, or a friendship club, or a social service agency or as a social justice organization using religious language.

If we allow our culture to accept us in exchange for our acceptance of this world, what good are we? Nothing.

We are God's people. We don't need a lot of power.

How much salt do we need when we cook? A small amount flavors a large dish. We just need to be who we are. Numbers aren't important in order to be the instruments of human transformation. Our faith is in the power of God working through us is.

Our reading continues with **verse 14**,

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

I once heard someone say, "Don't tell me who you are. Show me your lamps."

What do the lamps you've put in your house say about you? I would guess that some things could be said about where you place them.

"Let your light shine," Jesus says.

Let your light shine but if you're going to put a Christian license plate frame on your car, drive respectfully.

How do we let our light shine? Martin Luther, the 16th century Church reformer, purportedly said, "The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship."

Light shows us the way things are, it keeps us from stumbling in the dark, it takes away our fear of what we can't see, it extends our productive time.

What is your light? What does your light do?

We make a difference in the world by maintaining our character as Christians in a time of decline and danger.

How are you salty in a time when there are so many influences that would dilute our messages of the good news in Jesus Christ?

How do you let your light shine as good works in response to what God has already given us in Jesus Christ?

David Crosby died a couple of weeks ago. He played with 60's rock groups like the Byrds, Crosby, Stills, and Nash, as well as others. He and his wife used to come into Nate 'N Al's deli in Beverly Hills, one of Sally and my favorite restaurants when we're in LA. He would just sit quietly with his head down and eat. One night, as we got up and I turned to leave on a day that Sally had braided my beard, he raised his head, looked at my beard braid, nodded appreciatively, smiled, and went back to his dinner. It wasn't a lot, but I thought we had a moment. 😊

People pass by us all the time in life. What can we offer them.

We offer the world a place of genuine community, a kind of community that is hard to find in our culture. We point the world to the genuine transcendence it seeks in a living relationship with the one true living God when the world doesn't always have the words to ask.

We have been given the Word. It is Jesus. It is the transformed life we have come to know in Him. And it is good news for everybody.

Our reading concludes, beginning with **verse 17**,

17"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For 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. 19Therefore, 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. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Wait a minute. That kind of sounds like bad news.

The Scribes were people who made copies of what we would call the Old Testament, what might be called in Jesus' day the law and the prophets. They made their copies by hand and would check their work by knowing how many words, how many letters, and how many punctuation marks were in every book. They checked them reading forwards, and then they checked them reading backwards. They knew the Bible!

The Pharisees were lay men who had retired from their life's work to dedicate themselves to learning 613 religious laws and to keeping them every day. They were deeply respected and every man (only men could be Pharisees) wanted to grow up to be a Pharisee.

How could anyone be more righteous than the Scribes and the Pharisees?

They couldn't. That's Jesus' point. Nobody's perfect. Everyone falls short. Nobody keeps God's laws perfectly. And breaking any part of God's law separates a person from God.

The Gospel, i.e. the Good News, is that, though we deserve punishment, God has given to us a Savior, Christ the Lord.

It's been said that there are three uses of God's Law. The second is to control bad behavior. The third is to show us what pleases God. But the first is to show us that we need a savior.

That's the point that Jesus is making, not that we need to be more righteous than the Scribes and the Pharisees, but that we can't, that we need a savior.

The price of eggs has been going up like the price of natural gas. People can't smuggle gas as easily as they have been smuggling eggs into the country lately. Eggs!

We have something infinitely more valuable than any earthly commodity. How can we make it known?

Ross Douthat, a conservative columnist for the New York Times and the author of the book Bad Religion notes that the Christian Church has found itself in danger and decline several times throughout its history and two things have brought it back: holy living and the arts.

How do we bear witness in Monterey Park and in all the places in our world where the Christian Church is struggling?

Jesus tells us not to worry too much about our numbers, but to seek only to receive God's righteousness through faith and to do God's will, trusting in God's power to make all things new.

How can we stem and stop the violence, the danger, and the decline? By pointing to the power of God to transform the human heart. By being the salt and the light and the bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ and living the natural outcome of a life of faith, a living relationship the one true living God.

Let us live the holiness of our message and live our lives in response to the love that God has first shown us on the cross.

That is all that matters for us to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in Monterey Park and beyond.

