

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "Do Salt! Do Light!"

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

February 7-8, 2026

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I hadn't heard the name "Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos" for years. Many years. Any Spanish speakers out there who can translate for us? Yes, "Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos" means "Our Little Brothers and Sisters." I knew it as an orphanage outside of Mexico City in a little village called San Juan Teotihuacan, in the Valley of the Sun & Moon, location of magnificent Aztec ruins. I spent the summer between my freshman and sophomore year of college volunteering there. I learned that many of the children there were not literally orphans. They often had at least one parent, but the families were so impoverished there wasn't enough food to feed everyone so the children were sent to NPH.

Fr. Bill Wasson was the American priest who founded the orphanage. While he served his first parish in Cuernavaca a 15 year old boy named Carlos was caught stealing from the church's poor box. Fr. Wasson learned that the youth robbed the poor box because he was hungry. The priest showed up at the court hearing where the teen was going to receive a stiff prison sentence. He petitioned for and won custody of Carlos and the other 8 youth in his jail cell. That experience was the little acorn from which the great oak of "Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos" grew, by God's grace. Salt sitting in a shaker doesn't do any good; it has to season something! A lamp that's off doesn't do any good; it has to be turned on! Fr. Wasson wasn't content just to "be" salt or to "be" light: he had to **do** salt, he had to **do** light!

It was in reading about the new archbishop of New York that I bumped into "Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos" again. Bishop Hicks used to minister at a branch of NPH in El Salvador. Fifty years ago when I volunteered there were 2 locations, both in Mexico. Now this organization is serving abandoned and vulnerable children in Mexico **plus** 4 Central American countries, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Bolivia. Talk about the Holy Spirit writing straight with crooked lines! A chance encounter between a hungry teen and a compassionate priest led to the inception of NPH in 1954. Since then seventy years' worth of children and youth have been fed, clothed, educated, nurtured -- because an adult's heart was moved and his conscience was pricked by a kid who was so hungry he broke into a poor box to buy a meal.

"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... [L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."
(Matthew 5:13a, 14a, 16)

Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will give an important reminder:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

It's in the doing of God's will that we move from being salt sitting in a shaker to being salt that's seasoning and healing the world. It's in the doing of God's will that we evolve from simply **being** a lightbulb to **shedding** light! We've had young church friends who have gone to far-away places to serve, including Kristin Morton who was a Young Adult in Global Ministry, serving in England; Alicia Dodds who served in the Peace Corps on the island of Dominica; Alana Christopher who served in the Peace Corps on the island of Comoros off Madagascar; and Katherine Christopher who served in the Peace Corps in Malawi. (You may remember my mention of the "mouse-on-a-stick" appetizer to which Katherine was treated.) These young people traveled the globe, spreading the light of Christ, and now they do that back home.

At our Wednesday Bible study we discussed how we can spiritually salt the world and shed Christ-light in small ways; it doesn't have to be a huge thing, a grand gesture, the founding of an institution. After Sandy, folks made soup and sandwiches and distributed them to neighbors who live near the Main St. bridge over the canal. People showed up to bag dripping clothes and sort through waterlogged papers in flooded homes. You've banded together over the years to help elderly church friends who lived alone and needed rides multiple times a week to dialysis. Some of us have joined our Quaker brothers and sisters for peace vigils on the Manasquan Circle. During the pandemic people bought gift cards from local restaurants to help those businesses stay afloat, and then gave the gift cards to pastors for distribution to needy families. Very recently, purchasing trays of lasagna for the Trinity Code Blue shelter, buying underwear and socks for the men served by the Jersey Shore Rescue Mission, donating coats and scarves, supplying the food pantry with pet food and toilet paper – all of these are salty actions that flood the world with light.

One flashlight in a stadium doesn't make much of a difference. But tens of thousands of concertgoers or sports fans holding up their lit phones makes a huge difference. "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." But it's even better for an entire community to set the world ablaze with Christ-light! In Minneapolis various faith communities are organizing food

collection and distribution to families who are afraid to leave their homes to grocery shop. These are people who are living their faith out loud, not letting it sit idle in a salt shaker, people of faith who are actively shedding light because they are not satisfied to passively be an unlit lightbulb. They are brave to feed God's children who live in fear in the face of injustice and lack of due process.

At the end of today's Gospel Jesus asserts, *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:20) That must have been more-than-shocking for the disciples who were the first to hear it. When it came to the letter of the Law (all 613 laws in Jesus' time), **no one** outdid the scribes and the Pharisees in dotting every "i" and crossing every "t." The **spirit** of the Law was another matter. When laws conflict, the law of love should trump all; the 2 greatest commandments should be our North Star: love of God above all else and love of neighbor as oneself. Another word for righteousness is justice. Loving our neighbor includes working for justice.

In today's first lesson we hear the Lord explaining to the children of Israel, newly returned from exile in Babylon, why their prayers never seem to be answered:

...day after day they seek me...

as if *they were a nation that practiced righteousness...* [Isaiah 58:2 NRSV]

[In other words, "Don't kid yourselves that you're so holy.

Be assured, I see how you treat your neighbor and trample the poor." But:]

"If you get rid of unfair practices,

quit blaming victims,

quit gossiping about other people's sins,

If you are generous with the hungry

and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,

Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,

your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. [Isaiah 58:9-10 *The Message*]

Jesus amazingly enough deputizes **us** to share in His ministry of "[*shining*] on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death... [*guiding*] our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:79). The world needs to be seasoned/salted with the Good News of God's love for the world. The world needs to be illuminated with the light of Christ shining into dark corners, revealing injustice, inviting those who live in the shadows to come out into the light. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham