

Kailua Christian Church
Sunday, September 24, 2023
Message: "We are Salt and Pepper Shakers"
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture:

Matthew 20:1-16: The Laborers in the Vineyard

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, **4** and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. **5** When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. **6** And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ **7** They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ **8** When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ **9** When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. **10** Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. **11** And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12** saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ **13** But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14** Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ **16** So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” [\[a\]](#)[\[b\]](#)

Sermon: We are Salt and Pepper Shakers

I’ve been preaching the last few weeks on how to bring the Gospel to those who are on the margins of society: those who have been broken, suffered, and seek redemption that only God can provide. Since my conversion at age 17, I’ve been firmly resolved that this transformational power of Jesus is the main function of Christianity and should be our primary mission as the church.

But what about the rest of us? What about the kids who grew up in good, stable homes, those of us that have been blessed with loving families and plenty of food at our dinner tables, those of us who may have seen trials and tribulations in our lives but have always had the tools at our disposal to overcome them? Do we matter to God?

In my younger years, I downright disdained that demographic. These stories from Jesus about the last being first, about the rich having the hardest time getting into heaven, and the tales of the ragtag band of misfit disciples, hung in my mind as I involuntarily sat at fancy fundraising dinners and engaged in what felt like meaningless small talk about unimportant topics. I don’t care about your crystal glassware, Judy, people are dying on the streets!

And then I got fired for that attitude. Throughout college and seminary, I bartended as a way to fund my education. I loved bartending. Bars in many ways are not so different from churches; people sip their martinis and share their deepest secrets; there's always a small community of regulars who support each other through life's journey; bars often host charitable events to benefit the wider community. There's whole TV shows out there about bars and their communal nature – such as Cheers, How I Met Your Mother, and It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia. I learned a lot about how to communicate with people pastorally from my work in bars, including the time that I got fired from one.

At the bar I worked at in Boston during seminary, every Wednesday the opening bartender was supposed to take all the salt and pepper shakers in the restaurant, dump them out, wash and dry them, and then refill them with fresh condiments. It was a terribly tedious task and I hated getting assigned Wednesday opening for that reason. One Wednesday, right after I had gotten back from my first tour of Syria and the Boston Marathon had recently been bombed, I decided I simply wasn't going to do that. I had just seen children being maimed and orphaned and some of the worst atrocities imaginable during that Syrian tour. Then only days after I returned, I had been present at the Boston Marathon only to witness lethal explosions and an entire city get locked down by terror. All this happening in the world, and they want me to refill salt shakers?! All I wanted to do was spend time with my bar regulars and support each other through the recent crisis we had endured in our city; I wasn't going to waste my time on the stupid refill project.

When my manager asked me about the salt and pepper shakers, I proudly and angrily told him as much, and he told me my shift was over and not to come back. I stood with my mouth open at the unintended result of my outburst, staring at my manager in disbelief. How could he possibly not see that we needed to be with each other and talking about this tragedy, not refilling the damned shakers? He responded that just because, in fact *especially because* the world was in chaos, we had a specific duty to keep the places of consistency operational – including the salt and pepper shakers.

And he was right. The bar community that grieved for Boston's losses that week didn't need me to add to that grief by inserting my opinions or stoking the flames of sensationalism. What they needed from me was to keep their familiar, sacred space stable and functional so that they had a foundation to rest in while they processed the chaos in the city.

Jesus didn't say that the first workers of the vineyard weren't going to get paid at the end of the day, or even that they would get paid less than the workers who showed up later. You see, those of us who grew up in middle class Christian households with stability and abundance are the workers who came at the beginning of the day to work. People searching for redemption after traumatic loss are the workers who came at the end of the day. And we all get paid the same grace from God.

The workers who came at the beginning of the day are the stabilizers for those that come at the end. They've already laid the crops, nurtured the soil, and prepared a space for the workers who came at the end of the day to work in. We are the salt and pepper shakers that have to be refilled weekly, so that there is a clean, comfortable place for those who are grieving, broken, and seeking redemption to be held.

Yes, the first will be last, and our primary mission as the church is to lift up those on the margins. Our primary mission is to provide spaces of love and care for those who have experienced violence, conflict, and anguish, but we can't do that without keeping our salt and pepper shakers full. We have to be cleaned and refilled weekly so that we can provide that comfortable space for others when they need it.

By refusing to clean those shakers, I lost a lot. I have wonderful, inspirational memories of that bar. We had a drink that girls could order if they were in danger of date rape or abuse – we saved several women from catastrophic evenings. One time Bruce Springsteen, who grew up in that neighborhood, randomly came to the bar and threw a free benefit concert, which was a huge community building event. We held a memorial in that bar after one of the regulars decided to end his life one tragic night. One time we had a patron pull a gun on the manager and we had to rally together as a united staff to tackle him to the ground and disarm him, but that's a story for a different day. These are the powerful experiences of working with the new laborers in the field that I craved – the dynamic, explosive events of a thing changing from brokenness to renewal. But, I threw all of those experiences away because I refused to pay the workers at the beginning of the day, those salt and pepper shakers, the denarius they were due.

So I see you, Salt and Pepper Shakers among us. And I see your value as needing to be cleaned and filled so that we can have a stable place for those transformational moments among us, and for those who walk through the doors seeking a new life. To close, I ask you to pray with me.

Heavenly Father,

We come before you with hearts overflowing with gratitude and joy for the stability and happiness you have blessed us with. Thank you for the peace that resides within us and the fulfillment we find in your presence. Thank you for making us Salt and Pepper Shakers.

Lord, we pray that you deepen our understanding of your divine plan for our lives. May our contentment in you empower us to extend a helping hand to those who are broken and lost, guiding them towards the light of your love and grace.

Grant us wisdom and compassion to recognize the pain and struggles of others. Open our hearts to listen and offer comfort, sharing the hope that we have found in you. Use us as instruments of your healing and restoration, allowing us to reflect your love and mercy in all that we do.

Fill us with the salt that flavors your grace and redemption, so that others too may experience the peace and joy that come from a relationship with you. May we be beacons of hope, shining your light into the darkness, leading others to a life filled with the salt of purpose and love.

In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen.