

“HOW” MATTERS

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

February 8, 2026

Epiphany 5

Matthew 5:13-20

You are the salt of the earth. But what if salt were to lose its flavour? How could you restore it? It would be fit for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. You don't build a city on a hill, then try to hide it, do you? You don't light a lamp, then put it under a bushel basket, do you? No, you set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before others so that they may see your good acts and give praise to our Abba God in heaven. Don't think I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. The truth is, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the Law, not even the smallest part of a letter, will be done away with until it is all fulfilled. That's why whoever breaks the least significant of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kin-dom of heaven. Whoever fulfills and teaches these commands will be called great in the kin-dom of heaven. I tell you, unless your sense of justice surpasses that of religious scholars and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kin-dom of heaven.



Part of the job description of the United Church Ministers is that we will include in our work for a congregation time to be involved in the wider church of the United Church. Some ministers sit on wider church committees or take on short-term roles here and there. I myself am on a national committee called the remedial committee under the office of vocation and I'd be happy to talk about what that committee does if you're interested sometime. Sometimes ministers, you know, over time get invited to help out another congregation here and there one way or another.

Yesterday I found myself an hour and a half northwest of here helping a congregation have a conversation about some money that was in their bank account. Isn't that a nice conversation to have? They sold their building a number of years ago. They had a building that was fairly new. I remember when it was built and it was on the edge of town. It was kind of in a new neighborhood. They used to have property downtown, but it was limited by the block they were on. It was an odd shape and it was older. And the town basically traded them the plot downtown which they wanted to use for a park with a plot in a new neighborhood just kind of straight up. And they built a new building in that new neighborhood. But they found it was so far out of the way from where everything's going on and it was too big for what they needed. Even though the building was paid for and the land was paid for, it just wasn't adequate to their needs. It didn't match their mission. And so they sold it. And since then they have been renting space and living their best life as a congregation back downtown. They have a spot in the strip mall right on one of the main streets. All the while the proceeds from their sale have been sitting in savings waiting for a plan. I was there and invited to help them have

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conversations about what they might think that this resource can be in terms of their life and ministry. And it's actually the first step of a complicated wider church approval process. The region has to oversee whatever choice they want to do and make sure it makes sense within the wider mission of the church and within the mission of that congregation. And so the process that I led them through over a few hours was not about what to spend the money on, but making sure they understood who they were, how they define themselves. They have a formal mission and vision statement. They have a church motto that's emblazoned on their sign, *a loving community*. And so we spent the first half of our time talking about what all that meant to them and how they make that real. What was the mission/vision that they were living into right now and what do they see that being in the future? And then they talked about what the money might do to further enable that mission. The King James version of Proverbs 29 verse 18 may have said it best. It's not as powerful in other translations: *where there is no vision the people perish*.

An underappreciated part of Old Testament history are the first years after the people returned to Canaan after they had been in slavery in Egypt for more than four centuries. Canaan was the land they'd only heard stories about where the patriarchal family of the people of Israel claimed their origin. Israel, in fact, was the nickname of Jacob. Jacob and his family moved to Egypt and they'd been there for four centuries, much of which was as slaves to the pharaohs of Egypt. But the story goes that after they left Egypt, after a 40-year journey through the Sinai wilderness, the Hebrew people approached Canaan from the east. So they're coming through what would be Jordan on a modern map to cross the river into Canaan: the modern West Bank. Now Moses, who had secured their freedom, had negotiated with God and with Pharaoh got them out of Egypt in the wilderness, brought complaints to God about what the people were needing and made sure that the people had food and water along the way by the grace of God. Moses shared key commandments from God, led them to the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Moses is quite elderly at this point, but he's made the whole journey right to the edge of the Canaan lands. And the task of leading the people into those lands over the river would fall to Joshua. And once in Canaan, the people who identified with the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 ancestral lines coming from Jacob's family, settled in different parts of Canaan. And although they shared this common identity as the descendants of Jacob who worshiped the God of Jacob, Yahweh or Adonai, there was no national structure to their nationhood beyond the rough borders that separated where the tribes settled.

It would be three and a half more centuries before the tribes joined together and recognized the common ruler when Saul became the first anointed king of Israel. But between the times of Joshua and Saul, the people of Israel were not ruled by a person. Now certainly there were respected elders within each community, within each tribe, but this was the time of the judges and as I said it's I think it's an underappreciated part old testament history you know beyond the separate stories of maybe Samson and Ruth. Even very well-versed church people probably couldn't tell you a whole lot more about the time of the judges other than maybe a name here and there. You might say, "Oh, well, Deborah was a judge." See, it was diverse. It wasn't just male judges. Part of the significance of that era of the judges has more to do with that non-kingdom structure than the individual stories of what the judges said and did in the book of Judges. There's stories of specific judges among various tribes. They tended to arbitrate paths forward for the people usually in a time of crisis of some kind.

Just because Israel didn't have a king did not mean that their system had no governance. The people were governed by a moral and a spiritual code that they later collected together and refer to as the Torah, the law. Now, it's almost certainly an apocryphal story (a story read back in the time) rather than one that may have happened historically. But the book of Deuteronomy is structured as a written or a detailed speech that Moses gave to the people before he died and before Joshua took him across the river. The core of the book of Deuteronomy actually dates probably to the seventh century before Jesus' time long after Israel had

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established itself as a kingdom: likely during the reign of the Judaeen king, Josiah. So it's even after the kingdom split between north and south. But I love the way that they tell the story in Deuteronomy. They recounted things as a liberated people who'd been shaped and matured through a generation or more of wilderness wandering. And they're about to open a new chapter in their lives and their existence as a people. Before they did that, they paused and their wise elder, maybe even still glowing radiantly from those mountaintop experiences with their God on Mount Horeb, gave them rules to live by in the new land they were about to enter. Now, no doubt, as the people wandered through the Sinai Peninsula, they developed standards of practice for good community living. They developed rituals and routines for experiencing their faith, connecting to their God. And they figured out how to live well as a nomadic people. They figured out how to live justly and fairly. They had codes of conduct as to how we treat people who need a little bit more care and what we expect from people for the greater good. Minimally, they had those ten precepts that Moses shared from one of those mountaintop times:

1. You don't place other gods before Adonai.
2. You don't make or worship idols.
3. You don't claim God's authority without any merit.
4. You keep the seventh day of the week as a holy Sabbath.
5. You honor your parents.
6. You don't murder.
7. You don't commit adultery.
8. You don't steal.
9. You don't lie about others.
10. And you don't obsess over what others have that you want for yourself.

Like any other pseudo legal code, the seeds of the Torah were not always going to be followed. And as such, they also developed remedies and included them within their Torah for breaches of those and other social standards. This is how we make ourselves right for each other. Like us, those Exodus Israelites, those imperfect people, worked toward a higher goal that maybe they never reach. We recognize that we too are works in progress. We learn through our experience. We learn through experiment. We trial and error things. And we definitely have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes and even bad choices.

The people had words passed on down to them. Local judges encouraged them to live that out.

Words are powerful. Words are meaningful. They can bring flavor to people. They can bring interest and excitement to communities and even the world as a whole. But it's when those words inspire impactful actions that the words take on real meaning. As was implied in the second half of our reading today. There were factions in the early church who wanted to do away with the old standards. They don't apply anymore. *We've a new way of experiencing God presumably in favor of some new standard.* And maybe it was to completely turn off those who may have come to the community through a different way. And then Jesus says, "Don't think that I've come to abolish the law. Continue to live well. Continue to live justly. Continue to follow those good words of advice, strive to be the most righteous person around. If you think those whose lives are centered around living through the Torah, like the Pharisees and the scribes, you need to be more faithful than them. You need to be the most righteous person you possibly can be. That way, you're going to make a difference."

We are unique spiritual beings seeking wholeness within ourselves, community and creation guided and inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus and other sources of great wisdom. We seek to learn, change, and grow. We are committed to provide a safe and welcoming and expecting an accepting gathering for people of all ages, genders, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, faith, socio and economic backgrounds to worship God, foster connections, nurture wholeness, and strengthen

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relationships. We celebrate the richness that diversity and inclusivity bring to our community of faith. Welcoming all persons to participate in every aspect of church life, including membership, leadership, and participation in all sacraments, rights, and ceremonies. We work toward building partnerships, inspiring change in community, healing wounds of isolation, marginalization, and injustice. With God's love, we go into the future with hope. We value community that is caring, welcoming, inclusive, diverse, and respectful of all. We value spiritual nurture that inspires us, deepens our faith, and transforms us through multiple means of expression. We value passionate engagement with the broader community that builds shared understanding, partnerships, and social justice. We value opportunities for growth in broadening our understanding of the stories of our faith and what they mean in our lives and work. Learning, changing, and growing together, we can be a vibrant, relevant, and sustainable united church presence in southeast Edmonton.

All of those words can be found on Spirit of Hope's website, spiritofhope.ca. The sum of the vision, the mission, and the values of what this congregation hopes to be. Do we always get it right? No. Are there aspects where we're prioritizing maybe one part of that over another? Always. We do the best we can with what we've got. I do believe that each of us, you, me, all of us are unique spiritual beings. And so many of us long for wholeness for ourselves, for our communities, and indeed for the whole of the world. The most that any community of faith can be is the sum of its parts. It's in the sharing of the stories and the ideas and the energy and the resources that we can learn and change and grow together. My hope is that in some small way, words on a website or lyrics of a hymn or passages of scripture or spoken prayers or words of reflection or meditations through music and silence that we become more than words and ideas. I pray that words inspire meaningful actions that help others to learn and change and grow and discover their own sacredness.

Let's be flavorful. Let's be rainbows of light that make all of these words real in this world. Amen.

#30TLUS "We are a Rainbow"

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