

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Melissa Schaser
Your People | Matthew 5:13, 18:20**

Good morning! My name is Melissa Schaser and I am the newest pastor on staff here at Christ Presbyterian Church. I'm on the Congregational Care team with Rich and Jody Phenow and Debbie Manning, and I teach quite a few of the classes here at Christ Presbyterian so I've gotten to meet a few of you. Before we dive into our sermon today, will you please pray with me?

Lord God, we ask that You would open our hearts and our minds to Your words and Your truth this morning. Lord, let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and good and wholly unto You Lord. Amen.

So, my name is Melissa Schaser. I started here about six months ago and I am grateful that right now we are in a sermon series called Seven in 2017. We have had the opportunity over the last few weeks to look at our lives, not our lives as shiny and clean and good, but actually John illustrated that we are broken, cracked pots. In the midst of us trying to make our lives look perfect and good and shiny, often our lives just break and it is the power and the grace of Christ that pieces us back together so that His light can shine through those cracks and through our brokenness.

This morning we are looking at how that light shines specifically into our relationships. A mentor of mine—actually the mentor that gifted me this stole—once told me that I would be the exact same person this time next year, except for the relationships that I have and the books that I read. Now, that may seem a little bit simplistic, but nonetheless, the meaning behind her words stuck with me—that our relationships truly are what shape us. They shape how we live and how we think and how we go about being in the world. And so, since many of you are still getting to know me, I thought a great way to introduce you to me would be to offer you an insight into some of the people who have shaped me throughout my life. So in the early '80s, my sweet parents met in the Bahamas, on spring break actually. Not the most conventional way to meet a spouse perhaps, but they got married

and have been together...their love has lasted for 33 years. A few years after they got married they had my brother, and a few years after that they had me. [Picture shown] I still have that Easter bonnet. And then, when I was about eight years old, we adopted my sister, Jennifer. And so these are the core people who really shaped my young life. And after I accepted Christ at age ten, God continued to surround me with friends, throughout my adolescence and into college who drew me back to God and also showed me how relationships form and change us in deep, deep ways. After college, I went to Vanderbilt Divinity School to get my Master of Divinity degree, and in my first year I met this fellow who was getting his PhD—was in his first year of a PhD in Religion—and I like to say we fell in love while whispering Greek and Hebrew to each other. But, we fell in love and a few years later we got married, and that was about two-and-a-half years ago. [Picture shown] God has continued to bring people into my life that draw me and direct me back to Him in new ways and in the way that I need Him to at that very moment.

So, this morning in this community, we have the opportunity to look around and see the faces of people around us who also can draw us closer and closer to Christ. During His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:13, Jesus tells His disciples that you are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

Jordan did a wonderful job with that Children's Sermon, demonstrating how our relationships need to be salty. In the Israelite ancient world, salt was used for a variety of purposes, but the two biggest things were that it was meant to preserve and it was meant to flavor. My husband Nick and I like to say that God has good culinary tastes. In Leviticus, He says that the sacrifices the Israelites make that have fat and salt are a sweet smelling savor. Salt was meant to be transformative, and that's why Jesus doesn't say that we are just like salt, but He says that we actually are salt, because the moment that we come into contact with another person, we are meant to be transforming them and preserving their sense of hope and life.

So my question for us this morning, as we think about what it means for the light of Christ to shine through our broken cracks and what it means for us to be the salt of the earth...my question really is, if in 2017 we allow ourselves to be the salt of the earth and the light shining in the darkness, how will our relationships actually change? What will the on-the-ground, tangible reality be of those relationships? And I've come up with three ways that I think we will notice them changing. The

first is that they will become countless. Before the introverts make a beeline out of this room, this is not about a number but more so about a posture toward one another. Our relationships will be convicting and we will draw the light of Christ out of one another, and then they will be deeply, deeply committed. So our relationships will be countless. As I studied the scriptures over the last few weeks, I realized how rare it is for us to see only one person in scripture. Most often people are interacting with each other or interacting with God throughout scripture, and it makes sense because in Matthew, Jesus tells us that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there among them. Now, when Jesus said this He wasn't just making a statement out of the blue. He was naming something that happens in the Bible over and over again—that when two or three gather, God usually shows up. This happens with Adam and Eve in the garden. Adam and Eve are two people and then God shows up. In Genesis 18, Abraham has two messengers show up to him, and God is there with him also. At Jesus' transfiguration, He goes up on a mountain and meets Moses and Elijah, and Jesus is God. We see this at the resurrection and in so many other stories, and it makes me actually think of when Paul says in Galatians 2 that "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Certainly when we gather together with one another, God shows up because it is Christ who lives in each of us. Now it is interesting to me that we are supposed to be invoking God and the presence of God shows up in our relationships, when often our relationships are some of the most difficult places in our lives. At the beginning of this sermon series, we took a survey of the congregation, and we asked, "What are your most difficult relationships?" Out of 870 respondents, 217 said that it was a spouse or significant other, 141 said that it was a child, 121 said it was a parent, and 134 said it may be an in-law. So these are the relationships that so deeply impact us, and it hits me that those are the people that we usually see on an everyday sort of basis. They're the ones who are deepest in our lives, and the reason I think that those can be the most difficult ones is because we know each other. We know the good; we know the bad. We know the joy and the struggle, and it can be difficult for us to keep extending grace after grace after grace over time. Well, Jesus speaks to us through this. One of the values that we have at this church is being a welcoming on-ramp. You all have heard this phrase as we have been going through our values, and a few weeks ago as I reflected on this value, it struck me that our church as a whole can't hope to become a welcoming on ramp really for anyone until each one of us commits to becoming, in our own being, a welcoming on ramp for others. Until we are willing to not only say, "Hi" and to check in, but to actually get into relationship with each other and to say "Yes" to other people's invitations as well. I have had the opportunity to be in a number of communities—circles, and Sunday morning

communities where people welcome each other really, really generously. And the verse that comes to mind when I watch them do that is when Jesus says,

²⁸“Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. [Matthew 11:28-30]

When the crowds would surround Him, Jesus welcomed people onto himself. He didn't offer difficulty or heavy burden, He simply welcomed them. So those people in our lives who we can think of that are just easy to be around, the ones who take us just as we are, who we can be honest with—that is what Jesus is calling us to emulate, and if we are able to do that, our relationships will become countless because we will welcome all around us unto ourselves.

In addition to being countless, if we keep that saltiness in our relationships, our relationships will also become convicting. As we just said, relationships can become pretty messy and pretty difficult. But if we keep our saltiness, we won't only shine our own light into other people's lives, but we will draw the light out of their lives. One of my favorite authors is Henri Nouwen. He was a Catholic priest and professor at Notre Dame and Yale and a bunch of fancy places during the 1960s through the 80s. I was recently rereading his book, *Life of the Beloved*, and was struck by his introduction. He says what inspired this book was an unlikely friendship with a New York Times reporter named Fred. Fred came to his office at Yale Divinity School one day to interview Henri for a column, and Henri says that during the conversation he realized that Fred was bright, that he was creative and passionate and that he really didn't care to be having the conversation with Henri. So before Fred left, Henri thought that he could just let him walk out the door and be done with it, but instead he stopped him, and he said, “Fred, do you like your job?” And Fred said, “No, of course I don't like my job, but I have to do it for the money. What I really want to do is be a novelist. I want to write a full book, but because of constraints with money and time, I just can't do it.” And Henri said that in that moment he felt a deep sympathy and a deep love for Fred because behind Fred's cynicism and sarcasm, he sensed that he truly did want to live a creative and fruitful and giving life. And so instead of allowing Fred to walk out of his office door, Henri stopped him and said, “Fred, quit your job, come live at Yale Divinity School, and write that book that you are wanting to write.” And Fred accepted his offer. Fred had been feeling the weight of darkness closing in, and I think that each of us have some Freds in our lives. Those people who maybe feel some darkness

and some weightiness closing in. Fred wasn't moving forward, he wasn't living passionately out of the call that God had on his life. But the beauty is that Henri stepped in; he stopped him from continuing on that path.

I know that I have had a number of phases in my life when I have felt that same darkness closing in. Even just about eight months before Nick and I moved up here, we were living in Nashville and both of us had a deep sense that God was calling us to something more. We knew that each of us had deep callings in our lives for ministry, and we just weren't seeing the path ahead that God had for us. And there were a number of moments in that time when we felt some doubt crushing in. And while we could read scripture and while we could pray, and those were great sources of strength, our relationships were what ultimately pulled us through that time. We had parents and family members who were reminding us that God had brought us to Nashville in the first place, and had brought us together. They were telling us not to forget God's faithfulness in the past. We had friends reminding us that we were still doing great ministry in Nashville—there were people who liked us there, and that we were still living out our call, just in a different way. And then at just the right time, God opened the doors for this precise position at CPC. I have heard so many stories from people within small groups and Bible studies and circles and Sunday communities who have been that light for each other during times of deep, deep darkness—who have pulled each other through. The writer of John tells us that Christ is the light that shines in our darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Our relationships are meant to shine that light.

Lastly, if we are going to live lives that are salty and that have light shining through our brokenness, our relationships must become deeply committed to one another. One of my favorite stories of commitment in scripture is the story of Ruth and Naomi. After both of Naomi's sons die—Naomi is an Israelite—she addresses her now widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite and Naomi tells her to go back to her hometown and back to her family; Naomi couldn't support her, she couldn't bring her along. And Ruth, instead of allowing Naomi to turn her away and push her away, Ruth instead says,

¹⁶“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” [Ruth 1:16-17]

In that moment, Ruth opens herself to Naomi and tells her that she is committing her life to following and protecting and even being with her—that line, “May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” She wants to be buried next to Naomi. I venture to say that almost everyone in this sanctuary has at least one person to whom they are deeply, deeply committed, either a spouse or a friend or child, someone to whom you would really sacrifice everything. Some of you know that before I came to be at CPC, I was a hospital Chaplain for about 3 ½ years, and I was at a children’s hospital for 2 ½ of those years. While I was reflecting on this theme of deep commitment, a specific image came to mind. It was while I was serving on the oncology unit, and I remember praying with this family whose child needed to have surgery and the parents were understandably very concerned and grief-filled as they were preparing for this. So, I spent a lot of time visiting and praying with them. When the time came to move the child down into pre-op, I watched the mother climb into the hospital bed with her child, and I looked kind of inquisitively at her. She said, “I’m going to stay with my baby as long as I can.” So I then watched the hospital staff wheel this mother and her baby down into pre-op. *Wherever you go, I go. Wherever you stay, I stay.*

Jesus committed not only to His family or to His friends, but to every single one of us when He came to this earth and He died for us. He shares the parable of the lost sheep, saying that if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain and go in search of the one who went astray? And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. Jesus’ deepest desire was to have every one of us drawn to His heart, not just because He loved us, but because He was deeply committed to us. I think that one of the things that stop so many of us from truly committing to one another is fear. C.S. Lewis once wrote that no one ever told him that grief feels so much like fear. In committing ourselves to one another, we become immensely vulnerable because we open ourselves. And it strikes me that in order to even embrace each other, we have to open our arms wide, just as Christ opened His arms wide for us. In the face of the fear to truly commit to one another, Jesus gives us hope. At His resurrection, in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is grieving at Jesus’ tomb. And the Bible says that she sees two angels, which—from the beginning of the talk—we know that God is somewhere nearby. Then low and behold, Jesus shows up to her, but she doesn’t quite realize that it is him. So, He asks her why she is crying, and after the explanation, He calls her by name. She realizes that it’s him and she

embraces him, but he tells her,

¹⁷“Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” [John 20:17]

That language should sound familiar because He is alluding to the story of Ruth, when Ruth says *your people will be my people, and your God will be my God*. And we know that Ruth then follows up with *wherever you die I will die, and there I will be buried*. Ruth talks about how death will separate her and Naomi. So then, Jesus appears to Mary, and by alluding to Ruth, He communicates to Mary that death no longer has the power to separate. That separating force that would have worked for Ruth and Naomi no longer has the power to separate because Jesus conquered death. Jesus shows up and tells her that her grief was understandable, but it was not eternal, and that He is the one who brings life. In the face of true fear, Jesus calls us into true commitment to one another, and to draw closer to each other in the promises of Christ.

So let's take a moment now. Let's look around the sanctuary. Do you see three people who know your story, who you feel deeply committed to, and who you know are deeply committed to you? If that answer is yes, I want to challenge you to go deeper and wider this week. Spread the net wider than three and show those three that you deeply value them, and that you are invested and committed to them. If the answer is no, my hope is that you would take the opportunity today, as it is Community Sunday, to talk to us. Talk to a staff member or a pastor, talk to someone out at the tables about what it would mean for you to get involved in a small group or a Bible study or a Sunday community, and truly open yourself up to the others who are in the sanctuary, because each one of us wants to be a part of the body of Christ, and we cannot be a body if we are not connected. Each of us deserves to be known and loved and heard, so I pray that you will accept that invitation.

My prayer for us in 2017 is that we will find ourselves opening up to one another, so that the light of Christ will shine through our brokenness. May our relationships become countless as we posture ourselves toward one another in a welcoming stance. May our relationships become convicting as we shine light toward one another and in the midst of darkness, pull the light of Christ out of one another. And may our relationships be deeply, deeply committed in givenness to one another. Let us begin and live in these countless and convicting

and committed relationships today. I will now direct you to the screens – we're going to watch a video about some of these great communities that we have.

[Link to video shown: <https://vimeo.com/203012051>]

It's so great to hear the voices and see the faces of people who have deeply invested in community. I encourage each one of us as we leave this place to not just greet each other but welcome each other. In the Great Room please talk to the people at the tables if you are interested in getting involved in any of our communities.

John Ortberg, one of our favorite authors here at the church, says that human beings who give themselves to relational greatness—who have friends that they laugh with and cry with, learn with, fight with, dance with, live and love and grow old and die with—these are the human beings who lead magnificent lives. My prayer for us this morning is that we would truly live magnificent lives. So now, may we go.

And the power of God the Father who has created us to be connected to each other, and the grace of Jesus the Son, whose sacrifice allows us to welcome each other with full grace, and in the power of the Spirit that fills each and every one of us and gives us life and breath, go in peace and joy this morning. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.