

## THE DIFFERENCE DISCIPLES MAKE

Matthew 5:13-16

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Criminologists tell us no person enters and exits a room without leaving something of themselves behind. There will be a fingerprint, a footprint, a trace of hair, a thread of clothing or some other DNA evidence that we have been there and done that.

On our way to Holy Communion today, I want to raise a few questions with you who are seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ:

What kind of footprints are you leaving on the sands of time?

What difference will it make that you have crossed the stage of life?

How will you be remembered?

Disciples follow Christ. Disciples love one another. Day-by-day disciples try to make a difference in their world! That is the point of Jesus' simple similes that form the scripture reading for today.

*YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH.*

*YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.*

Come, let's unpack these two little simple statements that we may find direction of being salt and light for our world and our day.

**YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH**

Before I was big enough to read the Bible, I knew the meaning of that statement.

Salt of the earth people lived in our community. They were moral, stable, dependable, solid folk who had as much concern for others as they had for themselves.

In the little town of my origin, my father lies today in a hospital. It is very unlikely that he will ever live an independent life again. My father is far from perfect. But, he is a salt of the earth kind of person. Orphaned at age 11, he could have lived his days resentful. Instead, he got a job, took a wife, and together they dug out a living through the years that seemed to be plentiful. He could borrow money on a handshake, cut a deal on his word, and come Sunday, he parked the tractors and went to church. He is as honest as the day is long, as straight as an arrow shot from a bow, as moral as any man who ever walked the face of the earth.

If the world were full of people like my father, police would be bored, the banks could fire their regulators, businesses could lay off their collection agencies, and the IRS wouldn't need auditors. Sometimes I wonder, what will the world be like if salty people lose their saltiness?

Salty people preserve society. Salt was to the ancient world what canning, packaging, and refrigeration is to our world.

You can't walk down the streets of Old Jerusalem even today without a leg of lamb slapping you in the face, or a salted fish looking you in the eye. Salt kept meat from spoiling. Without it all of life became rotten and rancid.

The first disciples had no problem getting the point. *You, my disciples, are the salt of the earth, the preservers of society.* There are some questions, it seems to me, that salty people ought to be asking in our day. Sometimes we get used to things that I'm not so sure are good things to get used to. Occasionally, somebody ought to be asking the questions of meaning behind our madness. Just because we can do it, does that mean we should to do it? Where does knowledge gain wisdom? Where does drive engage discernment? Where does

science listen to religion? A Bahamas-based company now offers human cloning services for \$200,000. A scientist from Lexington, Kentucky, has already announced that he will clone another human being somewhere in the world and is, in fact, at work at it as we speak. Somebody ought to be asking questions about that. Even if we can do it, should we do it? Salty people ask that question.

Salty people ask questions like “Is it better to be lucky than it is to be responsible?” From game shows to church bingo’s, the world has gone crazy over the hope of getting something for nothing.

In a couple of months, Tennesseans will vote on a state lottery. All the polls are predicting an easy passage. My issue with the lottery is not that Kentucky and Georgia need the money. It is not even the moral question of gambling. My question is this: “Why leave something as essential as education to a game of chance?” “If somebody is going to win and it might as well be you,” should we not also tell people that their chances of winning are something less than being struck by lightning? While we may use the money to educate our children, might we also be teaching children implicitly that the real winners are not the life time lovers of work, but the one time winners of a jackpot? What are we teaching in the long haul? Somebody ought to ask that question. Salty people ask it.

Salty people ask the question “Can the rich ignore the poor and ever be secure?” Most of the time you and I live in a world of work and commerce. It is a world that honors people for being attractive and productive. It reveres winners and scorns losers. It rewards independence and deplores dependence. Most of us have done quite well in that world.

We have a very hard time believing that everybody else is not just like us. But they are not. Not everyone has your intelligence. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have your health. Not everyone got the breaks that you have gotten in life. Not everyone has the same family background that you have. Not everybody has a wife who has made you what you are today.

That is why we must hear the cry of the needy. Those voices lead us to compassion, not competition. They teach us to connect through sacrifice and self restraint, not survival of the fittest. They teach us to win in this world by helping our neighbors and sharing with them rather than finding their weaknesses and defeating them. Salty people ought to ask those kinds of questions.

Salty people do not organize themselves into moral majorities nor political action groups. Too much of it in one place is really useless. It works best spread out, silent, seasoning the meat of the moment. In fact, you usually don't know it is there unless it happens to be missing. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." You don't have salt, you don't spread salt, you don't share salt, you don't buy salt, you don't acquire salt—*you ARE the salt of the earth.*

The second simile is like the first. YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. A city set on a hill shall not be hidden.

Several years ago I hired a pilot with a one-engine airplane to fly Sandy and me to Memphis to watch our son play football. I knew we were in for an adventure when we crawled into this tiny little plane and the pilot handed me a laminated check list and said, "Read these instructions while I try to figure out the instruments on this thing." With fear and trembling, and a lot of bumping we made it to Memphis. Coming back home that night, the pilot said to me, "See if you can recognize any landmarks of the city so I can get a bearing to find my way to this little airstrip on which we are to land." I can't tell you how delighted I was to finally see the lights on the runway and although it took us a couple of times to try to get down, at last we made it and we were safe. That night I understood the meaning of this text, *that a city set on a hill should let its light shine so people like me could find their way home.*

I love lighthouses. I like to visit them along the ocean. Every time I stop by one, I find myself humming that old song that I learned as a child.

Brightly beams our Father's mercy

From His lighthouse evermore;  
But to us he gives the keeping  
Of the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning.  
Send a gleam across the wave.  
Some poor fainting struggling seaman,  
You may rescue, you may save.

When our boys were teenagers and couldn't wait to get out on the town, we wanted to communicate to them that we would be waiting for their return so we had a little saying that we said at the door every night when they went out: "We'll leave the lights on for you because this is home."

What am I trying to say? I'm trying to say some people will never find their way home to God. Some people will never be rescued from a stormy sea. Some people will never land safely on the other side, unless our feeble lamps are burning bright. *You are the light of the world.*

So Jesus said, "Let your light shine before people that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Think of this for a moment. The sheer idea that a carpenter telling a group of fishermen in remote Galilee that they could enlighten the world by faithful discipleship seems absurd. Except that we happen to know, it's true. What appeared to be comic became cosmic and we are Christian today as a result of their faithfulness and their taking these words seriously.

Autumn Fletcher says, "When I was a kid I dreamed of changing the world. I believed I could end starvation, eliminate drug abuse, find a cure for cancer. In my imagination I made a perfect world where people didn't suffer and nobody went hungry. I never figured out how to do that. Slowly I realized, if God didn't

make the world perfect, I probably couldn't either. So now I am content to make a difference day by day. Sometimes it is a laugh, often it's a hug, and ever once in a while it is a word of encouragement fitly spoken. Yet I know God is using my small gestures to touch the hearts of others."

*You are the salt of the earth*

*You are the light of the world.*

If we can help somebody as we travel along,  
If we can cheer somebody with a word or a song,  
If we can keep somebody from traveling wrong,  
Then our living will not be in vain.

Amen.



















