

"YOU MAKE THE DIFFERENCE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
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INTRODUCTION

Last Spring after the Los Angeles riots, Steve Futterman broadcast an interview he had with one of the riot's many looters. The man had been one of many who had looted a record store. And when asked what he had stolen, he replied, "Gospel tapes. Gospel Tapes. I love Jesus!"

Our text for today is about people who love Jesus, but hopefully in a more positive way than did this looter.

DEVELOPMENT

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus defined His followers as the "salt of the earth", and the "light of the world". "You are the salt of the earth" He told them. Note that He did not say, "Someday in the future you will be the salt of the earth". Jesus told them that they were already the "salt of the earth". Then He went on and charged His followers with "You are the light of the world". And again, note that He was not saying that "someday in the future...if you do all that I tell you to do, you will be the light of the world". Nor did He say to them, "Now...if you work hard all your life, you will be the light of the world". They were already the "light of the world". It's important that we see this. "salt". "light" NOW!

So, let's consider for a few moments here this morning just what it means to be the "salt" of the earth and the "light" of the world.

SALT OF THE EARTH

First-off, what does it mean to be the "salt of the earth?" Now I'd like to think that Jesus here was complimenting His followers when He said this word to them.

Remember that back there in ancient times, salt was a valuable commodity. Workers were paid with salt. As a matter of fact, an interesting footnote is that our word "salary" is derived from the word, "salt". Persons wanting to buy something in the ancient world would pay for it with salt, in the same way that we use money today. And people would treasure salt as we might value gold or silver.

Salt was such a valuable commodity because it was used to preserve food in days before refrigeration. Even today, people who butcher their own meat often use salt to preserve it. Salt was also used as an antiseptic to clean out wounds. It may sound painful, but cleaning out a wound with salt was very effective in fighting infection.

Perhaps the most important thing about salt is that in its purest form it never loses its taste. Salt will always be salt. Salt does not get stale or lose its flavor if it's stored for a long period of time. This was a lesson a certain father hoped to teach his son. "Put this salt in water and come back to me in the morning" said the father to his son. The boy did as he was told and the next day his father said to him,

"Please bring me the salt you put into the water yesterday". The boy replied, "I can't find it, dad....it has dissolved." The wise father told his son, "Taste the water from this side of the dish".

Again the son did as his father had told him. "What taste does it have?" the father asked. "Salt" the boy replied. "Now sip it in the middle" instructed the father. "What does it taste like?" The son once again took a sip. "Salt" he exclaimed. "Sip it from the other side of the dish" the father continued. "And what's it like?" Again the son replied, "Salt". Next, the father told his son to pour the salty water on the ground. The boy did so only to discover that after the water had evaporated, the salt reappeared.

Perhaps in calling His followers the "salt of the earth", Jesus meant that once people become His followers there really is no turning back. "You are the salt of the earth".

What happens when someone decides that they no longer want to be a disciple or follower of Jesus? They are of no more value than salt that has lost its taste and gone bad. Back in the time of Jesus, salt was not pure salt like we have today, but was harvested with other natural substances that could and did go bad. When that happened, the salt was useless. There was just no way to restore the lost taste. Jesus said,

"But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"

The only thing to do with such salt is to throw it away; it is no longer valuable. It is worthless. The words of Jesus,

"It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot by men".

Dear friend....faith that has gone by the wayside is useless. It really is good for nothing. Remember that. "You are the salt of the earth."

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

He also called us the "light of the world". Remember how it goes...."you are the light of the world...a city built on a hill cannot be hid".

Again, it seems to me that Jesus is affirming and complimenting His followers. A city built on a hill is seen; for miles in all directions. Jesus was encouraging His followers to allow their light to shine in a darkened world. A light hid under a bushel basket isn't seen by anyone...nobody notices it. Jesus said,

"No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket...but on a lamp stand."

In other words, what we do in the name of Jesus ought to be visible to others living in our community, our city, our world and not hidden where no one sees it.

Warren Hudson of Ontario, Canada writes....

"One night at the end of a special Saturday evening worship service, a thunderstorm unleashed a bolt of lightning that plunged our church into total darkness".

And with the congregation seated in total darkness, the pastor felt his way to the kitchen to find some candles. The pastor handed out the candles to everyone who was present.

Persons lit their candles in much the same way that we do in our Christmas Eve service, each person sharing the light of his candle with the person next to him. The worshippers then made their way through the church's winding stairs and hallways down to the front door.

Warren Hudson remembers what happened next,

"Peering out...we could see the rain coming down in the streets. With traffic snarled, people were running for the nearest shelter. Looking around they realized that their entire city was in darkness. There in the darkness we stood...a little band of Christians, each clutching a light...not sure whether to venture out into the storm or to stay inside the church in hopes that the storm would soon blow over."

And there in the darkness the light of the truth struck him. In this most dramatic way he realized what it means to "be the light of the world". He went on to write,

"It occurred to me then that this is the temptation I face every day. It is so easy to play it safe and be a good Christian in the safety of the church building. It's a lot harder to venture out in faith into the storms of our world...a lot harder".

But like a beam of light...shining through the darkness...modern day followers of Jesus do stand out and are visible for all the world to see. Our temptation is to allow our light to shine only for those inside our church...while so often ignoring people outside. How are we in playing "our" game on the road...

SALT AND LIGHT / A HIGHER STANDARD

One thing we need to see and appreciate is this: that as the "salt" of this earth and the "light" of this world, we live by a higher standard. Jesus went on in this passage to warn His followers:

"For I tell you....UNLESS your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Please don't be misled. The Scribes and the Pharisees undoubtedly were among the finest people of their day. They had all sorts of rules and regulations. Oh, how they loved to debate the fine points of the Law. And they lived their lives in strict observance of the Torah. They thought that if they could live out their lives to the letter of the Law they would be found right in God's sight.

Jesus, however, pointed toward a higher law - the law of love. And here is where He wanted His disciples to shine. He wants us to "out love" everybody on earth. Instead of consulting a Rule Book to determine our actions, He wants us to act out of compassion. Jesus wants His followers to "go beyond" the religiosity of the Scribes and the Pharisees and truly become the "salt" and the "light" of our world.

Of course, there is a "glitch" to all of this and that is that sometimes the salt burns and the light glares. Salt burns. Light glares. An illustration...

William Willimon tells about a group of church women who were looking for a service project in their community of Pine Mountain. They really wanted to be "salt" and "light" and thought that they might do something down at the local jail. Now Pine Mountain is a favorite gathering place for thousands of high school and college students at the time of spring and summer vacations. There's a lot of drinking and sunbathing and carousing and getting into trouble with the law. The little jail there at Pine Mountain was always filled with some unfortunate youths awaiting bail or fines.

One of the church women thought it might be nice if they would make something for these young people and for the others in jail and so they first came up with toiletry kits, containing such personal items as a toothbrush and paste, soap and shampoo and a candy bar to make their stay in jail a little bit brighter. But something happened along the way to the jail. They were taken back by the conditions in the jail. The little jail was overcrowded...something like thirty a week in the jail. They discovered that their town was collecting over a hundred thousand dollars a year from its jail operations. The women were taken back by the terrible procedures in the jail. Older and younger prisoners and first time offenders and "repeats" were all thrown in together. One of the women even stood up in a church meeting and said that she was beginning to feel that "our city jail is a disgrace!" And that it was doing more to encourage crime than it was to stop crime.

The more time these women spent helping people in their jail, the more they saw things that they did not really like. They were seeing things that few citizens of Pine Mountain had seen. They noticed the attitude of the police toward their work. They saw signs of excessive force being used on prisoners. They heard rumors of money changing hands in order to get people lighter sentences. They did not like what they saw one bit and that was when the trouble really began. A group of these church women went to share their concerns with the jailer in charge.

"I knew we were asking for trouble when we first let you women stick your noses into things. You women ought to stay out of what is none of your business" he advised.

"What goes on here is really none of your business...why don't you stick to your church work and leave the legal business...the legal work to us."

To which one of the women from the church in a rather loud voice said (and pounding her fist on his desk): "This is church business". Now, believe it or not, they eventually got an investigation launched. The "jailer" resigned and things gradually got changed - and changed for the better.

It was about this time a year ago that Hillary Clinton was criticized for saying she could have "stayed home and baked cookies". Those women down in Pine Mountain could have stayed home, too....but you know...they decided to be "salt" and "light" - and yes, the salt burned and the light glared, but they changed things in their little corner of God's world and that's what Jesus was asking of all of His followers when He uttered those words on the Mount long ago, "You are the salt of the earth" "You are the light of the world". That's you and me He's talking about. Salt. Light. And called to make a difference in our little corner of the world as well.

I close with this story and it's one of my favorites. Tom Wicker who writes for the NY Times once told how he was invited to speak in the little Baptist Church - his home church - down in North Carolina. He was greeted by one of the Trustees who took him over to one side and said,

"You know, Mr. Wicker...the women in this church are really something. You know what they've gone and done? They've taken all their hard earned money from Bake Sales and Rummage Sales and they've bought a chandelier for the church. Did you ever hear of such a thing. Just like a hassle of women! Why, not one of them knows how to spell the word...not one of them knows how to play it...Mr. Wicker...what this church really needs is a new lighting fixture in the church...maybe you can help us."

What our world needs is more light and less heat...and a pinch of salt to preserve that which is good and lasting...you, my friend, are the "salt of the earth". You, my friend, are "the light of this world".

PRAYER Speak to each of us, O God, in these quiet moments in a challenging way as well as in a comforting way. Wrestle with us in the deep and hidden corners of our lives...and our hearts. The race is so short, even at its longest. So help us to run it well....and always to Your glory. In the spirit of Christ who calls us to keep on marching forward. Amen.

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