

Matthew 5:13-20

## CALLED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Due to all of the snowstorms that covered a good part of our nation this past week, the following story seems appropriate. Dr. Fred Craddock tells about the time he was to give two lectures in mid-October at the University of Winnipeg in Canada. He gave the first one on a Friday night, but, by the next morning, there was two feet of snow covering the area. His host couldn't get to him so he suggested that Fred walk down the block to a bus depot, which had a café. Fred made it to the café where other stranded strangers were gathered. He asked for a menu and a man in a greasy apron said, "What do you want a menu for? We have soup – that's all." Fred ordered the soup and the man brought the soup to Fred. He tasted it – Yuck! It was awful. It was kind of gray looking; it was so bad he couldn't eat it but he put his hands around the bowl and bent over the soup because it was warm.

The door opened and in came a woman clutching her little coat. The greasy apron man said, "What do you want?" and she said, "Just a glass of water." He said, "You have to order, lady. Look, I have customers that pay. If you're not going to order, you've got to leave!" And he got real loud about it. She got up to leave and started toward the door.

Almost as if rehearsed, everybody in that little café stood up and started for the door. And the man in the greasy apron said, "All right, all right, she can stay." Everybody sat down, and he brought her a bowl of soup. The place grew quiet. Everybody was eating this soup. Fred Craddock writes: I started eating the soup, and it was pretty good soup. I have no idea what kind of soup it was. I don't know what was in it, but I do recall when I was eating it, it tasted a little like bread and wine. Just a little like bread and wine. (Craddock Stories, pages 83-84)

A bowl of gray-looking, tasteless soup became transformed into something like bread and wine. That reminds me of how God, at work through Jesus, quite often took things that seemed small and insignificant and managed to change them into matters of great importance. A mustard seed grows into a large bush that provides shade and shelter for many birds; so also, faith grows and grows. A few loaves and fish were employed to feed a multitude. A simple loaf of bread and a cup of wine were offered by Jesus, at table with his disciples (then and now), to point to the greater reality of his body broken for us and his blood shed for us. The cross became the means for our forgiveness of sins; and, the tomb became empty, and death is emptied of its power as the crucified-yet-risen Christ offers us new and eternal life now and forever. In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus once again used small and seemingly insignificant items – salt and light – in order to transform his disciples into agents of the kingdom of God.

Salt is used to give or enhance flavor; and, it is used to preserve food. In ancient times, salt was employed as an antiseptic to clean out wounds and to fight infection. Light – whether from a candle, a lamp, a bulb or florescent tube – illuminates and displaces the darkness. The point is that a little pinch of salt or a small amount of light goes a long way to changing the food in front of us or the space around us.

Furthermore, by employing these two small yet effectively powerful substances, Jesus was saying to his disciples in every age, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world. You are called to make a difference, to bring the world more in line with the reign of God." Notice that Jesus didn't say, "Someday you might become salt and light." Rather, he informs all of his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." Jesus makes it personal and emphatic. We are called to make a tangible, significant difference in

whatever realm we occupy. The reason why is found in verse 16 – so that others may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. Jesus calls us to act out our roles as his disciples in the world. We are charged to act like him, to know and understand that the world is a better place because of how we live. God has chosen us to stand in the world and be the witnesses to God's presence and grace, and to show forth God's will and justice for the world.

Jesus' statement that he came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets reminds us that, as his disciples, we too are called to live by a higher standard. We are told to go beyond living by the letter of the law (as did the scribes and Pharisees), and to follow Jesus' example and live by the higher law of love. If we act with love for others, then we will make a tremendous difference wherever we are, whatever we do. After all, we are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world.

Here's an example of what that kind of godly love looks like in the world. In 1948, in Gastonia, North Carolina, there were two high schools. Gastonia High School was a large, all white school. It was a grand old brick building, with a tiled swimming pool and a spacious football stadium. Across town, Highland High School – on the other side of the tracks – was a small, all black school. It was a concrete structure with few windows and a small recreation area. And although they lived in the same community, the students from those two schools had very little to do with each other. Even in athletic events, they didn't compete against each other.

In 1948 Richard Penegar was the class president of Gastonia High School. He played on the football team and was voted by his classmates as "most popular." After graduation he went to college and then served in the army. Eventually, he returned to Gastonia where he took over the family business and became active in the Presbyterian church. In 1998, Richard Penegar – still acting in his role as class president – started making plans for his 50-year high school reunion. At first he thought of the jokes there would be about receding hairlines and expanding waistlines, wrinkles and bifocals, dentures and toupees. But then, something occurred to him, and – on impulse – he phoned Carrie Washington, who had been the class president of Highland High School back in 1948.

They didn't know each other very well, because they belonged to different churches, and they moved in different circles determined mostly by racial lines. But Richard said to Carrie, "Let's do something more than make jokes about how old we all are. Let's do something we should have done fifty years ago. Let's model something different for our own kids. Let's have our 50-year high school reunions together."

At first, his suggestion was rejected. The graduating class from Highland High School was suspicious, but Richard Penegar persisted, and it bore fruit. On a Saturday morning, in the fellowship hall of Richard Penegar's Presbyterian Church, those two classes came together. Not everyone came. Some refused saying, "Why can't we just have a nice class reunion of our own like everyone else." But most of those who could did come. Richard Penegar, a white man, reached out his hand, and Carrie Washington, a black woman, took it, and over grits and gravy they started down the road to friendship and respect. (From Douglas J. Brouwer's sermon, Shine Like the Stars, 8/9/98)

Richard Penegar and Carrie Washington are salt and light in the world. They made something happen in Gastonia, North Carolina, because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. So also, Jesus calls us to act the part we have been given, to act like him in the world. Yes, we are called to follow Jesus, to follow his example, and to make a difference in the lives of others – in our homes, our classrooms, our work places, and in our community – because we are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world. We have been chosen to be his disciples - to imitate him

and be a witness to him by showing compassion and forgiveness, to go about doing good in the name of God, and by pointing the way for others to see and to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

As we prepare to come to the table of our Lord Jesus, there to partake of the bit of bread and the small cup of the fruit of the vine (both of which point to a much great reality!), let us remember: we are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world. And, we are called to make a difference in the world – for the sake of all others and to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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