

Salt and Light: Being Different for Jesus' Sake *and* the Kingdom's

Matthew 5:13-16

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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In a paraphrase of Jesus' saying, Flannery O'Connor wrote: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *odd*." The last thing I wanted to be growing up in Charlotte was to be odd, to be different! I wanted to fit in. I wanted to wear what my friends wore, Weejun shoes, Gant button down shirts. I cut my hair to look the same as others.

Today, finally, these words of e.e. cummings ring true:

To be nobody-but-yourself in a world that is doing its best, night and day,  
to make you everybody-else means to fight the hardest battle which any  
human being can fight, and never stop fighting.

That applies to *churches too*.

In today's text Jesus is talking about being the right kind of different, being different for Jesus' sake and the kingdom's.

The first image is salt: “You are the *salt* of the earth.

What are the qualities of salt that makes the world better? Salt *brings out* the flavor of food. Salt *preserves* food. Salt *heals*. Ever gargled warm salt water? Isak Dinesen wrote:

The cure for anything is salt water: tears, sweat or the sea.

Salt in itself is not worth much. Its worth is what it brings to the world, how it brings out its flavor, preserves, heals. So the church is most truly the church as it carries on its mission in the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer awaiting his execution by Hitler in prison wrote:

The church is her true self only when she exists for others....not dominating but helping and serving.<sup>1</sup>

Once in history salt was so valuable that it was used as money, as currency. The church finds its true value as it is willing to be the salt of the earth, offering itself to the world. Some churches are on a low-salt diet. Quaker Elton Trueblood wrote years ago: The American church has been inoculated with a “tiny dose of Christianity so the real thing won’t take!”

Other churches are salt-shakers full of salt, but the holes are plugged up. So we need to take the cap off and unplug the holes so we can be useful again to the world. We are salt for the world, not for ourselves.

Just a pinch will do. It doesn't take much to bring out the goodness, to preserve the food, to heal what needs healing.

## II

Now we turn to the second image: *light*. "You are the light of the world." Are! So don't hide it under a bushel. In Jesus' day most families lived in a one room home. When night came and the room became dark, one candle could bring light to the whole room. Have you noticed what one small candle flame can do to a darkened room? So you can be too!

The second image is of a city on a hill. A city set on a hill cannot be hid, Jesus said. So don't turn out the lights. God has placed you in this world to be *seen!*

The prophet Isaiah offered these words of God to Israel:

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth!

So God gives us to the world as light. This is our mission: to be light to a darkened world, to show forth the beauty of God and the beauty of the world. So don't spend your time cursing the darkness of the world. Anyone can do that. Light a candle! *Be* a candle!

Both salt and light are *silent witnesses*. They don't make a lot of noise; they don't shout, "Look at me!" They just go quietly about, being what they are and who they are. And what a difference they make. As St. Francis is quoted: "Preach the gospel everywhere. If necessary, use words."

### III

Now let's return to the theme: Being different for Jesus' sake, and the gospel's. I've always trusted more in moral minorities than in moral majorities. Moral majorities can get too full of themselves and try to push their weight around.

It is often the moral minority offering its minority witness that makes a difference. Martin Luther King Jr., said that the vitality of religion is often found most at the edges, at the margins, rather than at the secure center. Another way to say it is that *you can make a difference if you are willing to be different*.

The Franciscan movement is an example. Richard Rohr the Franciscan spiritual writer writes about the quiet and important witness of the Franciscans have been as a minority movement inside the Roman Catholic Church. He says they have been "a sort of para-church on the edge of the inside of organized Christianity". St. Francis' starting place was *human suffering* instead of *human sin*. And that in Jesus God identified with our suffering. They focused on the

Incarnation of Christ, God becoming human, as the heart of salvation rather than the Cross of Christ. They emphasized the way we *live* as Christian rather than what we *believe*. As Rohr says, “Humans tend to *live* themselves into a new way of thinking more than *think* themselves into a new way of living.”

And they made their witness quietly, not argumentatively. They refused to use what Rohr calls “oppositional energy.” That is, trying to change others by being opposed to them. It is so easy in our pursuit of the good to fall into “oppositional energy.”

There have been other movements in Christianity whose minority witness has made a difference. Benedictines, early Baptists, Quakers, Celtic Christians. They weren’t different for differences’ sake. They didn’t take being different as a point of pride. They simply witnessed to the truth and light they had been given.

#### IV

In his letter to the Romans Paul said these important words:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I’ve always loved J.B. Phillips’ translation of this verse:

Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within....

Have you ever felt like the world was squeezing you into its own mold?

This happens to the church too. We can become what some have called “culture-Christianity”, shaped more by the world around us than by Christ. Carlyle Marney once quipped: “Southern Baptists are more Southern than Baptist and more Baptist than Christian.”

Churches in the South used the Bible to justify slavery. The German Christians fell under the sway of Hitler and Nazism. Culture-Christianity. When I was a student at Stetson University, a Baptist University, I was walking by a dorm the night Martin Luther King was assassinated. I heard students cheering! My stomach turned over. Culture-Christianity.

## V

I believe God has called Grace to be a different kind of church, a minority witness in our community, not as a point of pride but as a sign of our desire to follow where Christ is leading us; Not to say, “Look at us!” but to say, Look at Christ! Look at what God is up to in this world!

It's o.k. to be a minority witness in the American church. We should take heart in Jesus' words in Luke to his tiny group of followers:

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom! (Luke 12:32)

Did you catch the verb? "Give!"

Our culture says, "Bigger is better". I know that. I've lived in *Texas*! Grady Nutt quipped: Texans don't lie; they just remember big!"

Jesus does not call us to be successful—that is successful in the world's definition—but to be faithful.

There's a rabbinic version of the Jonah story I've loved. The old rabbis loved to re-tell the biblical stories so to make a new point. In this version Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach God's message of repentance and call the Ninevites to change. But no one listened, and some began to mock him. Still day after day, year after year he went through the streets preaching. One day a boy came to him and said, "Why do you keep preaching even though no one pays attention and some make fun of you? Do you still hope to change Nineveh?" Jonah replied, "I preached at first to change Nineveh. Now I preach so Nineveh won't change me."

Our first calling is to be who Christ is calling us to be. Then leave the "outcomes" in the hands of God.

So do we have the courage to be different in our conformist society? Then how be different? Different for Jesus' sake and the gospel's? To become who we are rather than who the world wants us to be? It may take a little shaking. Someone gave me a flash light whose batteries have to shaken before they will produce light! So with us sometimes.

I think the whole sermon on the Mount is showing us what this means. What it means to be salt and light.

Look at the Beatitudes which begin the Sermon on the Mount.

-Be poor in spirit, knowing your need of God.

-Weep with the weeping of the world.

-Hunger for justice and righteousness and stand with those starving for justice and righteousness.

-Be full of mercy.

-Be pure in heart—that is, want more than anything to be what God wants you to be.

-Be peacemakers in a war-like world.

Is that different enough?

Then Jesus gets personal and asks:

- Will you watch your anger and be quick to reconcile?
- Will you tell the truth and keep promises?
- Will you refrain from vengeance and the returning of evil for evil?
- Will you love not just your own, not just your friends, not just your neighbor, but your enemies too? And pray for them?
- Will you quiet your judgmental mind?
- Will you trust God to care for you and let go of your daily worry?
- Will you be willing to enter by the narrow gate, to take the road less traveled, for Jesus' sake and the gospel's?

If so, you won't have to *try* to be different. You will *be* different! You will be salt and light to the world.

## VII

The final words of Jesus in this passage may raise a question:

Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Yes, but didn't Jesus say a few verses later not to practice your piety and parade your good works in public? Didn't he say "Keep it hid?"

Yes, he did. But its all in the motive, in where we point. If we do these things “*in order to*” be seen and praised by others, keep it hid!

We don’t point to ourselves saying “Look at us!” We point to Christ and say, “Look at him!” You are the light of the world, Christ’s light. “Let it shine.”

Clarence Jordan was a Southern Baptist scholar in New Testament Greek. He left the classroom to form the first inter-racial community in Georgia, *Koinonia Farm*. In those days it raised a lot of ruckus. He also translated the New Testament into Southern vernacular, his “Cotton Patch” translation of scripture. This is how he translated the two words “good works” in our last verse:

Let your light so shine before others that they will see your *lovely ways* and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Your lovely ways. Same words Jesus used to describe what the woman had done as she poured costly perfume on Jesus’ feet.

Lovely ways. The ways of love. That’s what is at the heart of it, isn’t it? Be the light of love.

Wendell Berry wrote this beautiful little poem. It is a prayer, and it is our calling.

I know that I have life  
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love  
except it comes from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry  
this candle against the wind.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010).p.33