

“Making Your Mark”

Matthew 5:13-16

Christ Presbyterian Church
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January 25, 2009

Do you ever look around and wonder what difference just one person can make? I do. Sometimes we feel powerless when we look at the big problems of the world, like the economy, or the rise of militant Islam, or the problem of homelessness, or global warming. It's overwhelming.

But Christians have always made a difference in the world. Christians have founded hospitals and hospices; they've started universities and colleges. They've brought the good news about Jesus to every corner of the world. They've made better government out of concern for people's well being. They've been at the heart of social reform movements, everything from abolishing slavery to prison reform.

So, today's message is about making a difference, about the fact that we're not powerless. The first followers of Jesus knew they were weak and scared, but they found out they could change the world when the power of God worked through them. They were changed on Pentecost when they received the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians have the calling—and the *power*—to make a mark in the world. God wants us to be “salt and light” in the world. That means we keep making a difference in Jesus' name.

Salt makes food distinct. My dad went for decades hating oatmeal because an aunt made it for him without any salt. It was so bland it made him feel sick. Salt brings out the flavor. And in the ancient world, where there was no refrigeration, it did another thing—it preserved food and kept it from spoiling. The image tells us we're supposed to be distinct, different from the world but working in the world, helping hold back the effects of sin and decay.

So, what does being “salt and light” say about the difference we're supposed to make?

Being “salt and light” means the world is not our home.

The world's a dark place. Jesus says we're not at home in darkness, we're at home in the light. In John's gospel, Jesus says,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

But in the passage from Matthew, Jesus says,

“*You* are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14a)

That's a bold thing to say. What he's saying is, he is the source, the torch, and we're candles lit off his light. If he lives in us, then we reflect his light. Without us reflecting the light, there's no way for the world to see in the darkness. That's clear when Jesus prays for us,

“I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” (John 17:14-15)

Being “salt and light” alone can’t satisfy the world’s hunger.

Salt isn’t food. Only Jesus is the source of nourishment. In another place in John’s gospel, Jesus says,

“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)

So, we’re not the bread. But we have food to share, and it’s Jesus, and we have a role to play, and it’s being salty. Salt brings taste, and it preserves food, too. Through our lives, Jesus is preserving and bringing out the best in this sorry old world. To put it another way, we’re not the world is hungering for, Jesus is—but he communicates himself through us.

Being salt and light is a promise, not a command.

“You *are* the salt, you *are* the light.” There’s grace in that—it’s not, “Go be salt and light,” or “maybe you will be salt and light.” You are already! But even though we are lights, it seems that we can find ways not to shine if we want, and that’s why Jesus says, don’t cover your light. It’s like what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, “Do not quench the Spirit.” You can’t conjure up the Holy Spirit, just like you can’t save yourself, but you can certainly douse the Spirit’s effect in your life. You can cover your light and become indistinguishable from the world.

So keep on being salt and light. How? Well, this promise comes right after Jesus’ beatitudes. In other words, we are salt and light when we live in his new kind of life. When we’re merciful, when we have a pure heart, when we make peace, when we do what’s righteous. When we live that way, we show we find our real life in God. We show the world that we were created to find our deepest joy in knowing God.

So it’s not enough to simply wall ourselves off from the world and wait for Jesus to come back. We’re supposed to make circles of influence, to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

How do we do that? How do we make our mark? How do we actually *be* salt and light in the world? I see four ways.

First, we make our mark through prayer.

Prayer is the primary work of the Christian. Prayer changes us, and gets us in touch with God’s heart for the world. But it’s not simply internal or attitudinal; prayer also changes the course of events. It’s the way that our sovereign God has established by which he accomplishes his purpose in the world.

If we want to make our mark, we do it by asking God, “Lord, help me to make a difference. Help my life to count.” And part of the way he answers that prayer is by

stirring you up to pray for the needs of others, to pray for the needs of the world, to pray for the witness of your church. Maybe you've felt discouraged and powerless. Prayer changes that. Maybe you wonder what you can do, and it's not about how much stamina you have, or money, or influence. God says you can change the world from your living room by prayer. If you're not regularly doing that, I encourage you, I implore you to start making regular time for prayer. If you do, I promise it will make a difference in your life.

Second, we make our mark through the truth.

Romans 1:16 says,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

The good news about Jesus, that he's Lord of all, is true, and it has the power to change lives and to bring people into the family of God.

2 Corinthians 13:8 says,

"For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth."

And John 1:5 says,

"The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it."

The light John is talking about is Jesus, and it's the light of his truth, and it's *us*, too, if we stand in his truth.

What truth is that? There are a lot of dimensions to it, but a part of it is that your life has meaning. That whatever is getting you down won't last forever. That God can overcome whatever trouble is in your way. That you do have a future and that God is working something good for you, that you should never give up on God because he will never, never give up on you, and that nothing is ever able to separate you from his love in Christ, and that he will use all things, *all* things, for your ultimate good.

That's a reality the world can't overcome. Like the old song goes, "Glory! Glory! Hallelujah, his truth is marching on." That means that the Bible, God's truth for our lives, isn't just intellectually true. It makes life better when we put it into practice. Following God's law puts us in touch with what is good for our wholeness.

When you honor marriage, the family is strong, kids are protected, and poverty is diminished.

When you keep the Sabbath, you live a balanced life, and there is renewal. It's a pattern that corresponds to reality, and what we need for our well being.

It's that way with everything God tells you to do, because what he says is not only good, or pleasing, but also true. So we can make that clear to others by counting on God's faithfulness, by taking him at his word, by telling them about Jesus, by speaking the truth in love.

Third, we make our mark in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus says when people see our good works, they give glory to our Father in heaven. I see a couple implications in this. For one thing, it dignifies our work, because it's how people are going to perceive God. Imagine—they actually see God, in a real sense, by looking at his children! For another, it reminds us that it's not ultimately about us. It's not in order to get praise for ourselves, but it's to lead people to glorify God.

That's only possible because the Church of Jesus Christ is connected with his Spirit. Paul shows in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 that the church is the Body of Christ, and so it's where his Spirit dwells, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit unite all believers into one living organism.

In other words, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit that animates his Body. It's in the Body we discover our calling, what our life's about and we're supposed to do, where we live for each other and are sent for the world Jesus died for. So we are salt and light, we show the life of Jesus by our example. One essential part of our life together is supposed to be joy. Have you ever thought about this—you can organize a church, but you can't organize joy? It has to be received as a gift. And it is exactly what Jesus offers; if we're connected to him, our Head, then we receive it. Like he told his disciples,

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11)

Paul describes that, too, as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), a natural byproduct of being connected with the life of Jesus. Joy contains all the other gifts, and you can only get it by being in harmony with the life of God. And it is the nature of joy to radiate, to express itself. That's what being salt and light is about, just like the missionary calling of the church. It's being grateful, it's the instinct to communicate the joy that's been given to us.

Fourth, if we're not being salt and light, we get caught in darkness ourselves.

I need to end today on a cautionary note. What happens when we *don't* act in harmony with who Jesus has called us to be? It's not pretty.

In 1846, a group of people left on a wagon train from Independence, Missouri for California. They were a group of 81 people led by two men, James Reed and George Donner, and they reached the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada range by the end of October. That's when an early snow started to fall, right there at the gateway to California. They had gotten a late start, and had taken a bad shortcut that delayed them further. They argued about pushing on, but decided not to climb the mountains yet; they hunkered down in makeshift shelters and wait out the first snowfall.

It didn't stop snowing until it had dumped over 30 feet of snow, and they were trapped. Their food ran out, and when they were starving, they started eating shoestrings and boiled animal hides to stay alive. Finally, they turned on each other and stated to cannibalize their dead.

Rescue parties couldn't get the last of the Donner Party out until six months after they first got stuck. Only two people over 40 survived; almost all the children under five, and all the single men died, thirty-six people in all.

That's what's at stake in our spiritual lives. God calls us to move ahead as the church of Jesus Christ, but when we don't do that, we turn on each other.

It's when we don't follow the call of Jesus that worship wars erupt. It's when we forget that worship's about glorifying God and we think it's about entertaining us, and so we turn on each other when we're not getting our needs met. It's when we start to gossip and talk between other people's backs, and it tears churches apart. It's when churches dry up and starve to death spiritually. It's a common story, and it happens when congregations think it's about meeting their own needs and not moving ahead to where God's calling, not sharing Christ with their community, not being salt and light. If we don't keep moving toward where God's calling us, we turn on each other. So Paul says in Galatians,

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. (Galatians 5:15)

Let us then put off our fear and discouragement, put off our distrust or resentment, put off our sense of entitlement (see Colossians 3:1-17), and trust in God's power to give us what we need so we can move ahead and make a difference in the world.

If you let your light shine and let your life be salty, you can change the world. Look at the first Christian community. They started off weak and scared, hiding in the Upper Room, but God gave them his power to change the world. Once they received the Holy Spirit, they were transformed into courageous, self-sacrificing people, people with a grand vision, and from that little group the community expanded, Acts says, and thousands were added to their number. From 120 followers of Jesus on Pentecost, the church would grow until it made up about half the Roman Empire by the mid-fourth century, over thirty million people.¹

There's one more thing about being salt and light. You can only really be that if you're a Christian, or in other words, if God's Spirit lives in you. Maybe you've been exploring the faith, wondering what this is all about, or maybe you've been around church all your life, but you've never personally committed to Jesus. Whether you're nine or ninety, now's a time you can do that. Because being a Christian is being a Christ-follower, and that simply means you say three words: Sorry, Thank you, and Please: "I'm sorry for my sins, thank you for loving me so much you'd die instead of lose me, and please be the Leader of my life."

If you pray that, he will answer, and your light will shine. I'm going to give you a chance to pray that now.

¹ See, for example, Robert Louis Wilken: *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 199.