

Help for Bland, Invisible Followers

A sermon preached by
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Isaiah 58:1-12
1 Corinthians 2:1-16
Matthew 3:13-20

Are you a salty character?

That's what we say about someone whose
personality is distinctive, even a little abrasive.

Or we talk about a sailor's *salty* language.

Salty suggests a bit of an edge.

It's hard to hide that quality when you have it.

It makes for something memorable.

Jesus was a master of using the stuff of daily life
to make a larger point.

Today in our reading he talks about
following him in terms of the taste of salt.

And he brings in a parallel image
when he talks about the light, the light he has
brought to us, and not letting

the light get covered over
or somehow extinguished.

Salt and light are hard to miss.
Now, for us, salt sits in our shakers at the dinner
table. It perks up scrambled eggs.
But salt has become so inexpensive and
commonplace that we forget how essential,
how prized it was in the ancient world.

Up until about a hundred years ago,
it was one of the most valuable substances known.
It was almost as indispensable as water.

Soldiers were *paid* in salt.
That's why we speak of someone as
worth his or her salt.
Our word *salary* comes from the same root.
Salt was as valuable as money.
Because until recently,
it was the principal way to preserve food.
Before the age of refrigerators,
how else did you keep food from spoiling?

A friend of mine visited Africa recently, seeing whole sides of game hung on tree branches in the wild--in 70 degree weather!--with no fear of the meat going bad, because it had been salted.

Salt preserves.

And when we apply the image and think about our salty influence, we remember we are part of a movement that preserves what is good and right and compassionate--wherever we live.

So salt *preserves* food,
It keeps it from going bad and decaying.

And more than that, salt *flavors* food.

Think about salt on your tongue.
Maybe you don't know how to describe that taste.

But you know that flavor.
You notice it when it's missing.

In today's reading, Jesus challenges his followers
not to live in a bland and tasteless

and retiring way. We are to preserve what really matters. He says we are not to be status quo, uninteresting, blend-into-the-woodwork people.

We are not to be invisible in the world.

As many of you know, while I grew up in Southern California, my mother was born and raised in small-town Tennessee.

She had a southern gentility.

I learned growing up the value of not calling attention to yourself. *Don't provoke reactions*, was almost a motto. Be polite. Gracious.

That southern politeness has served me well. But too much graciousness can keep us from having impact on the world.

Jesus calls us to make a difference, to *influence* how things go.

He expects us to liven things up, lend a distinctive presence.

In the Beatitudes, read last Sunday, he's mentioned qualities that stand out.

Like being poor in spirit.

Are we poor in spirit in an age that seems to
reward the big ego?

Or, he said, Blessed are we merciful.
Are we merciful when the motto around us seems
to be, “When you’re hit, hit back harder”?
When people seem itching for a fight, like on
Facebook or in office politics, are we
peacemakers?

The goal is not to be different or distinctive.
The goal is to be like Jesus, and his character
living in us will make us distinctive.

Follow me into a broken world,
Jesus is saying,
truly go to the places I take you,
and your life won’t be boring.
Act in those countercultural ways
and you won’t be bland.

You are the salt of the earth.
It’s both a statement of what is,
and a challenge.

It's a challenge because our saltiness can leech away or get mixed with other flavors. Most of the salt of Jesus's time came from the Dead Sea. The waters were salty, to be sure, but also filled with other minerals and impurities.

So much so that the saltiness could be lost.

When the water evaporated.

What good is salt if it's not salty?

What good is your discipleship if you don't make the world around you better by your distinctive flavor?

So, do you speak up for what's right, even when doing so might cause you some disapproving looks?

Those who are poor in spirit, who are meek, who are pure in heart, who seek righteousness, they don't just act like that for themselves or for their small circle.

If they are living like kingdom citizens, the people around them will sense it, taste it.

The life of the follower of Christ is blessed not only for the follower, but for the others around.

Which gets to the second image.

That of light.

You don't light a candle
and then snuff it out. You don't turn on the dining
room light when you have guests over for dinner,
and then, once everybody
has found their fork,
switch it off.

The light we have experienced in our darkness,
the light of Jesus himself, isn't for us to hoard,
or try somehow to save by covering it
and hiding it.

So why are we sometimes so bashful
about our faith in Christ that people never
know what so lightens our life?

Why are we so *careful*? Careful to change the
subject when our co-worker talks about religion
and we could share our own convictions?

Why are we prone not to shine our light?
Why does a word like evangelism practically give
us hives?

My son, Abram, has three kids.
And this is what he says: “If you have little ones
in your house, at some point they get tall enough
to reach the light switch, and then realize how it
works. Which is a good part of human
development and all that, but it’s frustrating, isn’t
it, to walk into a dark room and turn a light on,
only to have tiny hands come right behind you
and turn it off and laugh?”

He and Sarah have a new rule: Only grown-ups do
the lights in our house!

For us, the light is meant to stay on, to shine, to
illuminate the darkness around us.

And our good deeds point to the light in us.
It can be simple: a kind word to a tired family
member, a dinner invitation to a neighbor.
At Thanksgiving or a Super Bowl party,

do we include those who don't have family in town? Do we give an invite to those who don't have a church home? Offer to pray for someone?

We look outside ourselves and our little worlds.

Today, I'm thinking of how we live in a world carrying the burden of 21 million refugees. 21 Million! It's astonishing how many displaced, fearful people there are, fleeing violence and persecution. 34 thousand a day are forced to leave their homes because of bloodshed and conflict.

Many of them mothers and children.

I know there is much conversation in our country about our responsibility, and what's prudent. I know people disagree about immigration issues. However those conversations go, I also know that at the judgment, we won't be asked if we've been safe and careful, we will be asked if we have been compassionate. We will be asked if we have made a difference in the lives of those in need.

Like Jesus said in Matthew 25,

will we clothe the poor, feed the hungry,
welcome the stranger? In words from today's
Isaiah reading, will we welcome the homeless
poor into our house?

It's deeds that make up our witness.

And it's also words.

Our message is Christ himself. Paul talked about
that in our 1 Corinthians reading, where he
resolved to know nothing among them but Christ,
and him crucified. Since Christ is attractive,
since sinners flocked to him, his light in us will
attract others, too.

We show a winsomeness in our reaching out. We
give up an afternoon here or there and spend it on
helping somebody out. We pass a homeless
person on Main Street and don't turn a cold
shoulder, but look that person
in the eye and smile.

Think of your neighbors. Like a friend says, If
you need an excuse, accidentally bake extra

cookies and tell them you made more than you
could eat and take them over.

Salt salts, light illuminates,
cities on a hill (or churches on a big block)
make their presence known.

Disciples, and churches, do good works of
so that people around them see good,
see God and remember God.

I mean, what if we were most known,
for our tireless deeds,
our warmly overflowing love?

What if the Christian church everywhere was
most known for its sacrificial compassion?

In a dark world, a world bored with its own
shallowness, what could be more distinctive?

What could have a greater impact than that?

Who could make a greater difference than us?