

“You Make a Difference!”

April 18, 2021

Are We There Yet? Series – 3rd Sunday of Easter

In-person & Livestream

So, it started with a simple question: *What's a seemingly small act of love or kindness that has impacted you?* I posed this question on Facebook as I was thinking about Jesus' words in this part of the Sermon on the Mount. I wanted to get some sermon fodder, and I was surprised by more than 70 responses - and lots of material! Here's some of what I heard...

Texts, cards, calls, visits at just the right time. Hand-written thank you notes, messages of sympathy and meals brought after a loved one's death - and not just immediately, but ongoing - checking in for weeks and months after, offers of friendship and empathy, words of advice that stuck, an ornament received after a beloved pet died, welcome from a new neighbor, hugs from children that warm the heart, coaches and teachers hearing from those whose lives they've impacted, homemade masks sent from a friend when they were hard to get last year.

A friend in Croatia literally took a picture of a meal brought to her that day. Someone who knew she was ill made a meal because they knew she could use the help. An acquaintance shared how kind it was to receive a card from her dentist after her mom's death.

And there was the kindness of strangers - a pay-it-forward story of a day made better because a stranger bought something in a drive-thru line, a truck driver who helped someone after they locked their keys in their car and then called to check on them later, a grocery store worker who took time to listen and care when someone was having a bad day, a family who took someone into their home when they ran off the road in a snowstorm. And while I'm aware that not all of the responses were a result of faith in Jesus, I have a feeling Jesus might say that they make a difference and are acts of grace.

Another question as we seek first the Kingdom of God. *Are we there yet?* Have we arrived at the fullness of the Kingdom? All signs would point to a hard “no” with so much pain and injustice that we see around us, and we need to be clear that there is much work to do. And yet we are aware of signs of God's reign every day. They are stronger than the evil, injustice, and oppression we reject and stand against even as we make those promises in baptism.

And that's exactly the point! Small things matter. The Kingdom of God is alive and well - it's coming into the world, and small deeds of love and care that take us outside of ourselves make a difference. Those examples of agape love will always permeate and change the world. Some of what was shared on Facebook happened years ago!

Perhaps you've had moments when you wondered if your words or actions made a difference to anyone. Preachers and pastors do, too. We wonder if we make a difference. I can confirm that small acts of love and kindness matter.

We have to acknowledge the underbelly, too - that small things done without love can make a negative impact. And we know this is true. One negative comment can undo ten positive comments. It's easy to focus on the negative. One thoughtless word can stay with us for a long time and do a lot of damage.

Jesus is calling us to understand the impact we have - and to claim the power we have to do good for God's sake. We're called to be difference-makers - just like salt and light make a difference - and our commitment reflects God's love and God's Kingdom.

A few of the responses I received were personal - the impact of my friendship with a seminary colleague or a trip to the hospital years ago to pray with a woman having surgery for breast cancer. It felt good to know that it mattered, but even more, it made me realize how much those small things matter to me.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine writes, "I think what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is beginning the creation of a new movement with disciples, but not a movement in the way we think about political parties. I think what he's doing is setting up a new family or a new community. How do you live in this group?"

Last week, Pastor Diane Gordon started us off on this journey asking that question *Are we there yet?* when it comes to embracing the way of Jesus. She talked about the "oddly upside-down blessings" that Jesus offers - not what we expect or hear by the world's standards, but what we can expect if we live for God. *Blessed* is a state of being - joy because we live in relationship with God. It's not a promise of a perfect life, but the promise of God's presence as we seek to be faithful - as hard as it can be. And sometimes, it's hard.

If we're staying with the road trip theme, perhaps the Beatitudes are like the way we'll travel - how we'll go - and what we'll take with us. Jesus keeps going after offering those upside-down blessings with expectations. We'll need some fuel for the journey, so we better fill up.

SHOW SLIDE: Filling up gas tank

It's not a far-off vision for the future, but a reality check for all of his disciples. Jesus is supposedly on a mountain or at least a higher place, which reminds us of Old Testament moments when God shows up, so pay attention! Jesus speaks in the present tense. He isn't talking something in the future, but the reality of what it means to live as his people right now! Being salt and light isn't something that will eventually happen; it's who we are right now! This is who God created us to be.

And even as we hear it for ourselves in a time of great change and uncertainty, in Jesus' time, the people were facing great change, too - mainly centered in how they thought about God and each other. The Temple in Jerusalem was gone. There were parties and factions within the faith community with different ideas about the future of

Judaism, and - no surprise - there was some conflict. Their present was unstable, and the future uncertain. This sounds somewhat familiar!

We could talk about change all day in so many areas, but let's focus on the church itself. We know that ties to institutional religion are decreasing. Just recently, a Gallup poll found that less than 50% of Americans consider themselves members of a church, synagogue, or mosque. It's notable because it's the first time the number has dropped below 50% since Gallup first started asking the question in 1937. We know that the idea of church membership is different than years ago, but nonetheless, the numbers are telling as we seek to live our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

So, what's the answer? Jesus says we are to be salt, intensifying the flavor of the world around us. Jesus says we are to be light, shining God's grace into the despair and fear many people feel. "Our goodness is to be so obvious," one writer says, "so in evidence, that, through our presence, the very presence of God's love and grace is felt in those around us."

And Jesus says these things to a community. In the original Greek, the language is plural "You are..." After just getting back from West Virginia, I've decided that "y'all" is a great term. Yes, these words apply to each of us. It starts with me, but living in God's Kingdom and working for God's Kingdom doesn't stop with our personal lives. We do this together as the Body of Christ.

Nowadays, salt doesn't have much of a positive connotation. Many of us watch our salt intake. But in Jesus' time, salt was a precious commodity. Salt was a preservative for food that was necessary if people were going to have enough to eat. Salt was a disinfectant, and a fertilizer – scattered and worked into the land so that it would be more productive.

So, when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he calls us to work into the world around us and to literally transform it. That's what I heard in the responses - transformational acts. Consider for a moment: we don't eat salt by itself, but we use it to enhance flavor. Our lives are offerings to God for God to use to transform the world.

When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," he calls us to be agents of God's work in the world – showing the love of God, bringing hope, and even exposing truth. Light shows the way and illumines spaces; light lets things be seen as they are. Light that shows the truth.

How do we show the truth about God? How do we embrace the truth that will set us free? How do we find the courage to expose what needs to be shared, said, and understood? In this moment, we're challenged to speak truth about the need to stop more gun violence, tragic deaths of young men of color in particular, hatred motivated by racism and prejudice, and everything that works against the reign of God. What does it look like to be salt and light right now? It takes courage.

Together, those who follow Jesus stand out like a city on a hill. Following Jesus is not and cannot be a private affair; it has to be visible to the world. It's always interesting to hear people say that "my faith is my private business." Yes, that's true, except everything we read in Scripture tells us that our faith is lived out in the world. That doesn't mean a self-righteous attitude and claiming to have it all figured out, but more the opposite. We're called to humility - bringing our questions about God and Scripture and humanity - the why? questions. We express our faith in Jesus so that God gets all the glory.

It was a blessing to read the responses - the difference-makers. My sister wrote, "When I was going through a series of medical issues, a parishioner from your church sent me a lovely lap quilt and the kindest note that prayers for healing came with it."

My mom wrote, "In 2001 at the Canterbury Cathedral in England, an elderly lady asked for my name and told me she would pray for me. Violet Frances Marks had no idea how much that meant, especially in that historic setting." That was 20 years ago!

From a college friend: "We have a Sunday school teacher from when we lived out of state. She takes one Christmas card she received from the previous year and prays for that family for an entire week. She also sends them a note of encouragement saying she is praying for them! I love receiving the notes a random week each year. I haven't seen her in 17 years but love knowing she's praying for us." Salt and light - what a difference that makes!

I invite you to watch this short video that challenges us to shine our light for others for God's glory. For those of you who are watching the livestream, there will be a break in the action because we're not able to show copyrighted material on our livestream. The link was sent out in Friday's note, and I'll send it out again later. It's about 2 ½ minutes, so stay tuned!

SHOW MEDIA – *This Little Light*

We are crucial to Jesus' mission. You are crucial to the mission of the Risen Christ to bring hope. Your journey of discipleship is vital to the coming Kingdom of God. Our journey together as the church is vital to the coming Kingdom. John Pavlovitz writes, we are a "redemptive community that seeks to perpetuate the heart of God in the world." What a powerful truth to realize - and to know those small acts make a difference.

Friends, we're in the season of Easter - when hope grounded in faith and action grounded in prayer are a sign of the Kingdom of God. You are a living witness to the power of resurrection. Christ is risen indeed, and we are salt and light - difference-makers - in his name!

May God help us. AMEN.