

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“EVERYONE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE”  
February 6, 2011  
Matthew 5:13-16  
ALL SERVICES**

Today I wish to remind us that we do not have to be exceptional to be significant. We do not have to be exceptionally gifted, or wealthy, or powerful to make a difference. All we have to do is to care and do what we can. Everyone can make a difference in the world. And it can start with you!

*“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”* What one person can do is like a pinch of salt in a pot of soup. It is like a single candle in a darkened room. Jesus stressed the importance of what a single individual can accomplish. We can do more than we think we can.

The Apostle Paul was only one person among many who responded to the call of Christ. But this one man changed the course of history by sharing the meaning of Christ with the Gentile world. He did what he could and it changed the world. Dr. Carlton Babbs was only one minister among many who responded to the call of integration. But this one pastor changed the course of history of this church and this community by being faithful to the call of Christ on his life and ministry.

In the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, the prophet called on the people of God to feed the hungry, to liberate the oppressed, to shelter the homeless, and to clothe the naked. He directed this challenge both to the community and to the individual. The needs of the world will never be met without the contributions of individual lives.

The whole world can suffer from one person’s poor self-esteem. A child of God should never feel unimportant or worthless. To do so reflects negatively on God our Creator. If anyone feels useless, ugly, or unloved, the world will be without one light, one life that could have made a difference. God believes in what each of us can do.

It is not what you wanted to hear. You have taken your lawn mower to have it repaired. You are encouraged to buy a new one, but you want to get another season out of the old one. The man takes a second, skeptical look at the machine and says, **“O.K., I’ll do what I can.”** The way he says it makes you wonder if he will. You have heard the same phrase used differently. A valuable antique table has been damaged. You take it to be repaired. The antique dealer admires the table and expresses dismay at the damage. **“I’m not sure I can restore it completely, but it’s a beautiful piece that is worth keeping. I will do what I can.”** It is exactly what you wanted to hear.

### **Our potential, for good and evil.**

We often hear the past referred to as a simpler time. It is true, of course, that there was a time when people had no running water, no electricity, no central heating and air-conditioning, no automobiles or airplanes, no telecommunications. Was that a simpler time? Well, in one respect it was. But it was also a time of high infant mortality, of short life-expectancy, and of lifelong toil for essentially every member of the family. The constant proximity of physical suffering and death was taken for granted. No one would choose what we call a **“simpler time”** over the **“complexities”** of today.

The many differences between the simpler time and the present time are an amazing array of testimonies to our almost limitless human potential. We become accustomed so quickly to all of these inventions and innovations that we soon find it hard to remember what life was like without them. Biographies written specifically for the young tell the remarkable and instructive stories of the Eli Whitneys and the Alexander Graham Bells and what they gave to the world. Today new developments in almost every area of human endeavor are happening so fast that it is impossible to keep track of them all, much less anticipate the impact they will have on our lives and our future.

The biblical accounts of creation are prophetic at this point. The God of creation has charged us as humans to have dominion over this entire creation. But we have been warned against misusing this stewardship responsibility. The human potential for evil, it turns out, matches the human potential for good. We are uniquely equipped to fulfill the purposes of God in the world, but with these gifts goes an enormous responsibility. We still have to learn this lesson.

## **Being salt, being light.**

In creation God bestows on the human creature both privileges and responsibilities. Jesus' entire ministry reflects this paradoxical understanding of human nature. Jesus both emboldens his disciples for the life of discipleship and warns them of the dangers of self-seeking. He wanted to build confidence in them and at the same time impress on them the perils of pride. In two magnificent phrases Jesus expressed the role given to his disciples in the world.

First, ***“you are the salt of the earth.”*** Salt was a major preservative of food in the first century. Apart from Christ we are corruptible and corrupting, but in Christ we perform a saving, preserving function in a perishing world. Salt, says Jesus, that loses its saltiness loses its usefulness. Today we experience salt primarily in its pure form and pure salt cannot lose its saltiness. The salt that came from the Dead Sea, however, was a mixture of salt and other material. When exposed to the weather, the salt tended to be lost leaving only what appeared to be salt. As the people of God, we are the world's ***“salty”*** salt.

Second, ***“you are the light of the world.”*** Light is self-evident in its meaning. Christ is the ***“great light”*** seen by those who walk in darkness according to Matthew 4:16. Jesus says that we are the light of the world. We do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel, but on a stand where it can light the whole house. Without Christ we are unlighted lamps. He lights his lamps that they may give light to all. We too, are meant to be ***“salt”*** and ***“light”*** in our world.

## **Simple calling, simple deeds.**

How do we function as salt in the world? How do we let our lights shine? Salt often does its work without being seen, but it cannot hide from our taste buds. It leaves no doubts as to its presence and its usefulness. What we do for Christ may not always be openly visible. Nonetheless, it makes an obvious difference. Light is seen. Light shines. Jesus himself says he is speaking of our ***“good works.”*** We are not justified by good works, but we are to be known by them.

A classic Peanuts comic strip shows the kids all bundled up and walking through the snow to school. They pass Snoopy, who is shivering in the cold. They stop and observe his plight. Finally, Charlie Brown raises his hand and says, ***“Peace be with you.”*** Then they continue on their way. Snoopy is left with a quizzical look, as if to say, ***“What was that all about?”***

Christ's call is simple. He does not ask us to move mountains or to transform a whole culture. He does not call us to tasks that lie outside of our abilities and capacities. Good deeds are usually simple deeds. If someone you know and trust, a physician, perhaps, says to you, "**I will do what I can,**" it is all you need to hear. God calls each of us to do what we can, not measuring its worth or value, not apologizing that we are not doing something better. Being salt and light simply means doing what we can.

We have heard it often: "**If everyone would light just one little candle, what a bright world this would be.**" We have heard it often because it is true. Imagine a world in which everyone lights a candle of honesty. Or a candle of peace. Or a candle of hope. Or a candle of compassion. What each of us can do is more significant than we imagine. If everyone were to light a candle, it would have to start with one person. Why not you? And if you are willing to light that candle, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

## PRAYER

Let us pray for individuals of every kind who are making a difference in the world:

That each priest and pastor will find joy and satisfaction in pastoral care.

That each world leader will light a lamp for freedom and peace.

That each school teacher will open young minds to new understandings.

That each nurse will sense the awesome responsibility of caring for the sick.

That each parent will love unconditionally and responsibly.

That each police officer will have a courageous and a caring heart.

Our Father, forgive us as your children for thinking less of ourselves than you do. Forgive us for not seeing the beauty and usefulness of the gifts you have each one of us. Awaken us to the glorious privilege of being your child. Move our hearts with compassion, that we may seek our proper place in the redemption of the world - - beginning where we are. Through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**