

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DIFFERENT

Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount from last week to His disciples and He tells them what they are and what they are not. He says, "You are like salt and you are like light and what you should not be, you should not be like the religious leaders." What does Jesus mean by using this analogy of salt and light? Why salt? When I first thought of it as a modern person who is not supposed to eat too much salt. I thought, salt that brings flavor, he's talking about bringing flavor and that's how most people interpret what Jesus is talking about. But the more I thought about it, I realized that in His time salt had a very different role in the culture. Without refrigeration, salt was the preservative. Salt kept things from rotting, kept things going. And light- pretty straightforward. In a world of darkness, you bring light and you shine. Lots of interpretations on what this means. For me, this week from my understanding, I think Jesus is suggesting to Christians/followers that it is our job to stand outside the culture; that we are to embrace our difference; that we can only bring saltiness to the situation if we're not part of it. That we can bring light to the situation if we're not part of the darkness. I think Jesus is telling us that we have a unique role in the world and if we completely conform, we're useless. When we do not live up to who we were created to be we're like a light put under a basket in a closet where it's hidden; it cannot play its role. Each of us has been given a special gift, a special way to be and I think Christ is embracing the fact that we need to do just that.

In the wonderful play, 'The night Thoreau spent in jail,' Ralph Waldo Emerson, big follower of Swedenborg, has a quote in the play and he says, "Cast conformity behind you," and I think that at its core is what the text is. We need to cast conformity behind us, we need to maintain our uniqueness, we need to be different.

But being different isn't fun. Growing up we learn to what, please our parents and then as we get to our teens what's most important in the whole world; not our parents but our best friends and then as we get older we try to please our bosses and pretty much we're always seeking to please. We want to be liked, we don't like being outsiders. Now I'm sure each of you has not just one but many stories where you felt like you were on the outside. There was the in-group and you're on the out-group. Everybody else had this in common and you didn't and you felt uncomfortable and there's a real desire to fit in.

One story in my life where I was very different is my one football story in honor of the Super Bowl, it's the only one I have. Now, I'm going to really surprise you when you learn this lesson about me that when I went to college, young, arrogant soccer player, the coach didn't put me in my freshmen year and I was so arrogant I said to the coach, "You're not playing me, fine. I will go and be the place kicker for the football team." And so I did. I knew nothing about football, I still know pretty much nothing about football but I went over and I was the place kicker and the field goal kicker for my college and got to kick in army stadium and kick against Princeton in some exciting games and I was pretty good as a soccer player. But I was never really part of the team. I never really understood the game, they didn't really care much for me. I came in and I either won the game or lost the game. I was either the best guy on the team or the worst guy on the team. It was pretty stressful. As the season went on I wanted to fit in, I wanted to be a football player and my coaches said, "Rich you're so scrawny that after you do the kick off we want you to run off the field because we're afraid people would come over and knock you over for no reason." So that's how much of a football player I was. In the last game of the season I said "I want to kick off and I want to run down that field. I am part of the football team, I wanted to belong. I've been wearing these pads the whole season, let's try them out." So what I did I kick off the kick off and my kick off went really far and I

sprinted down the field as fast as I could and then it dawned at me, I was a soccer player. I was faster than any of the guys on the football team and I was now ten yards at least ahead of the rest of the team. And then I saw these big, big guys looking at me and I realized, I was the target, I was the tip. So being a very courageous, being a very courageous football player, I slowly slowed down and let all the action take place in front of me. It was very embarrassing. When we watched the films of the game you could see this V with me at the head of it and then slowly watch me slow down as everybody else crashed into each other like a car accident in front of me. I came out unscathed. I was never really a football player, I was a kicker. That's a funny story for Super Bowl day but there are all kinds of ways that we are trying to figure out how do we fit in and convince our self that we're part of a team.

Diversity is a very popular buzz word in the culture right now. People like diversity. Diversity is a good thing but it's a tricky word, diversity because very often we do it on very superficial things. We'll say "Is your church diverse; your group diverse?" It's usually around gender or ethnicity or race but around ideology what people believe we're still not very diverse and very comfortable on our bubbles. We like to be safe. The evidence shows that people who move from a Conservative area to a Liberal area become liberal. People who move from liberal area to a conservative area become conservative. Why? Because instead of respecting diversity we like to hammer people into what we are: be like us. And I think that the text today is saying no, embrace your uniqueness, that's the true diversity and when you meet someone you don't agree with, don't feel a need to hammer them into the same view point that you hold. Instead, love them for who they are and how they were created, what's their story? Embrace the diversity of them and their uniqueness.

Now, that's a lot about the individual but what about the church? What should we be doing? How do we be salty? Where is our light on a hill? What about this church here? What's our role in the world? This last year of trying to create a community here, I have asked hundreds of people probably, what would make the service better or what would you like more, particularly in worship. And in true American fashion, I had about a hundred ideas of how it could be improved and it's almost diametrically opposed to the other person. We have all very clear ideas and this is the tricky part for the church right now. This last year, I have been doing a bit of outreach with Millennials and they have basically said, "I want a church that's a lot more consumer friendly. I would do it without the whole worship and just download a podcast of the sermon, that would be better." The question for the church and for this church as we figure out what's our saltiness, what's our diversity, what are we bringing to the table, I think we have to ask ourselves, when are we chasing the culture and when are we being available? When are we giving up on our unique gifts that we can offer on a sacred space and chasing after and becoming just as we use to say in the 70's, a church of what's happening now. It's completely relevant to whatever you are, we'll be that; you don't like that we'll be that. But at the same time if we don't evolve and transform, we aren't going to be heard, we can't be relevant. And I don't know the answer to that but I think that will be the question for the church in general and this next generation. What is the salt? What is the light? Where is our flavor in the culture? So I believe this text is calling us to each embrace our uniqueness that we have; to be a light, not to be something else, to be that unique saltiness that can even preserve this culture in this country. And in this time of turmoil in the world and in our country, I think it's the most important time for us to, as the text says, show by our works that we are followers of Christ, keep our light lit, maintain that saltiness in the world and really, truly be examples of disciples of Christ. Amen.