

Influence and Righteousness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on February 7, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"You are the salt of the world. You are the light of the world," Jesus told his disciples. "You're different. As different as salt is from that which it preserves and flavors. As different as light is from darkness. You're different. You don't have to try to be different. You *are* different!"

Last week I watched a great movie, *Norma Rae*. It's about a young woman who worked in a textile mill in a small southern town. Working conditions in the factory were terrible. Health care and safety regulations were non-existent. Low pay guaranteed perpetual poverty for most people in town. The workers were like medieval serfs, totally dependent upon the company and afraid to speak out against unfair labor practices for fear of losing their jobs.

Things began to change when Reuben, a New York Jew, came into town with the intention of organizing a textile workers union. His efforts were met with great hostility by workers and management alike. The workers were afraid they'd lose their jobs if they lobbied for a union. The owners were afraid they'd lose profits if the union gained a foot hold. After many set backs and disappointments, however, Reuben won the trust of Norma Rae and empowered her to organize a chapter of the *Textile Workers Union* in the factory which brought hope for a better life to the workers.

At one point early in the movie, shortly after she met him, Norma Rae looked at Reuben and asked, "Are you a Jew?"

"Yes", he said.

"I've never seen a Jew before. There ain't never been a Jew before in this town. I

thought Jews had horns. You don't have horns. You don't look any different from anybody else."

And then she asked Reuben: "Are you different?"

For a moment I thought Reuben would say, "No! I'm not any different. We're all the same." But I was surprised. He thought for a moment and answered, "Yes! I am different."

"What makes you different?" she asked.

"History!" Reuben answered. "History makes Jews different," he said *pensively*.

And Jesus said, "You are different. You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. You're as different as salt is from what it preserves and flavors. You are as different as light is from darkness."

What makes Christians different? We don't look different from non-Christians, unless maybe we're Amish. Non-Christians can have good marriages. Non-Christian parents can bring their children up well. Non-Christians can work for peace and justice every bit as much as we Christians. Non-Christians can be very religious. There are non-Christian industrialists who run factories on a just basis, and non-Christian doctors who are conscientious in the care of their patients. Non-Christians minister to the homeless and feed the hungry and clothe the naked as well as Christians. Christians and non-Christians speak the same language and share a common culture but we're different.

There are three things that make Christians different.

1. History makes Christians different. Christians understand history as *His story*, the story of God's gracious acts in history culminating in the birth, death and

resurrection of Jesus. How do we know that God is love? How do we know that God accepts us freely, by grace, apart from our works? How do we know that our standing before God is not based on our good works, or on our religious experiences, or upon our ability to change ourselves, but solely upon God's unmerited and free grace? Only through the story of Jesus Christ as told in the Bible and proclaimed by the church.

We hear the story of Christ only within the Christian community and from the Bible. We can't discover that story by contemplating nature or meditating on the meaning of life. We don't learn that story from mystical religious experiences. We need to be told the story. We gather here each Sunday for Church School and Worship to become more familiar with that story. History, *His story*, makes us different.

2. Baptism also makes us different. Baptism into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit sets us apart from others. Through the waters of baptism we enter the family of God where the story of Jesus is repeated and confessed week after week. Because we've been baptized we're different, we're a member of a peculiar people. We're odd.

3. Faith in Jesus Christ is a third thing that makes us different. We place our faith in the One who entered history in the person of Jesus Christ. We don't place our faith in a generic brand of God, some nameless, faceless Supreme Being. We trust in the love of God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, within the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Church. We're different, odd, peculiar weird because we trust that Jesus Christ, a crucified Jew who lived 2000 years ago is risen from the dead and Lord of the universe.

This is what makes us different. So, if we've heard the story of Christ, have been

baptized into the Christian community, and have placed our faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, we're different, we're odd, we're peculiar, we're weird. We are God's odd squad.

But what difference does our difference make? God has made us different in order to make a difference in the world. God loves this world. Christ died for this world. How much our town, our nation, and the whole world needs to be saved. The United States is arguably the most religious nation in the world, but it's also the most violent. Racism and hate crime is on the increase. The gap between rich and poor increases. Families are in crisis. Homelessness has increased markedly.

Salt exists to preserve and flavor food. Christians exist to preserve and flavor society. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the church exists to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. The church exists to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our house; when we see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide ourself from our own kin. Then our light shall break forth like the dawn.

Christians will never change the world by playing down our differences with the world. Norma Rae was empowered by Reuben to be different and to change the situation in the factory. The situation in the factory changed when she stopped being like all the other workers. She dared to be different. She spoke out when others feared to speak. She dared to make the sacrifices of time and energy and money that others were unwilling to make at first. She was different and because she was different she was able to change the factory and bring hope to her fellow workers. Jesus empowers us to be different, to be salt and light so that we might change the

town and the world.

It's exciting to observe the truth of what Jesus said being lived out in our own church. Last year some of you high school kids went to a Young Life retreat in New York. Some of you realized that you were different when you got back. You began to get up at five in the morning. You gathered at the home of Paul and Debbie Houseknecht for breakfast at 5 in the morning. For thirty school days you got up in the night, and made your way through the darkness and cold to their home. You spent an hour studying the Bible, praying, discussing your relationship to Christ and having fun to boot. Now a lot of people would say you're different. You're peculiar. You're down right weird.

But Jesus doesn't want us to just be weird and peculiar. You're different with a purpose. Like salt sprinkled on food in order to give it flavor, you're adding flavor to your high school and, hopefully helping to prevent it from going to hell in a hand-basket. You're involved in sports, in student council, the honor society, school plays, cheer leading, the student newspaper and yearbook and tutoring and raking the leaves of shut-ins. People see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.

Christ wants us to be different, not just for the sake of being difference, but in order that we might make a difference in this. Christ wants us to be different so that others might hear the story of Christ, respond, join God's odd squad and glorify God through good works.

You and I live in a very needy community. There are so many needs. Talk to Connie Winchester at the Neighborhood Services Center or to Kerry Lawless-Linde at the Oxford Area Day care Center which will close its doors on February 19. Talk to Ron

Hershey at the Lighthouse Youth Center. There's need for low cost housing. There's need for jobs. There's need for counseling. There's need for literacy tutoring. And how many of your unchurched neighbors would claim to be perfect? Probably none. Like us, they need Jesus Christ.

Some people have complained that the building we've built is too big. It is too big if our salt loses its flavor and if we hide our light. It is too big if we don't want to see the needs in the community. This building is too big if we aren't passionately concerned to reach the 40-50% of the community who aren't in church on Sunday. It's too big if we don't have the energy, imagination, intelligence and love to reach out in an intentional way to these people. It's too big if we don't care about offering a place where the senior center can grow. It's too big if we don't care about our preschool ministry expanding. It's too big if we don't see a need for a centrally located Well Baby Clinic. It's too big only if we have narrow vision and lack imagination, intelligence, love and energy.

But if we let our light shine and don't let Satan blow it out this church and all the churches in Oxford are not big enough for the needs. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Jesus exhorts us out of whatever complacency and fear we have to share his grace with your friends and to be a part of a throbbing, vibrant, vital, dynamic community designed to minister to the real needs of real people. You are different so as to make a difference.

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world. Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.