

“WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN WE MAKE?”

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I recall a cartoon from the 1980's. It showed a bus full of tourists going through South Africa's bleak Soweto slums. Each head had a thought bubble, cringing at the squalid misery of apartheid South Africa, saying: "What can one person do?"

Back then we just knew there was no avoiding violent revolution in South Africa. A vicious, bloody clash of black vs white, rich vs poor, dominant vs marginalized cultures was inevitable. No one could stop it. South Africa has had troubles since then. But thanks be to God, that fiery insurrection never occurred. So why was that? One clear reason was the quality of black leadership in the Christian church.

Nelson Mandela's mother was a committed Christian. His baptized name "Rolihlahla" means troublemaker. And so he was to the apartheid status quo. Mandela said of his own home Methodist church and others, "The church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievement of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the church."

Mandela taught Bible studies in college. Then after law school, he represented victims of police brutality and never lacked for caseload. Inspired by Gandhi, he organized non-violent resistance and boycott, inciting apartheid's ire. After 27 years in the notorious Robben Island prison, global pressure forced his release.

On the day Mandela was freed, he went missing. He sought out tea with the last apartheid leader, F.W. de Klerk. Miraculously, the new black majority government Mandela formed was mostly peaceful, with little retribution to the white minority. He won the 1993 Nobel Prize, became President, and ended apartheid in 1994. What inspired all this? "Religion was the motivating factor in everything we did."

For the purposes of our Gospel lesson today, I want to refer to Mandela as Light. That is because, wherever he went, crowds sought him out, not because of his eloquence. He wasn't a riveting speaker. It was because of his beaming smile. If you can smile as he did after 27 years of brutalization, people will listen to what you say. We like to say that people who smile so luminously can light up a room.

But let's not forget Mandela's partner, Bishop Desmond Tutu. His mom was a single mother who cleaned houses and cooked at a school for the blind. One day Desmond stood in the street as a white priest walked by and doffed his hat out of respect to his mother. Tutu couldn't believe it. Was such a thing even possible?

Tutu later bonded with that Fr. Huddleston and another priest, John Collins. The trio worked with Mandela to bring apartheid down and lift democracy up. Tutu headed a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" all about forgiving oppressors.

Aside from spiritually advising Mandela, Tutu reformed the South African church, worked to control the spread of AIDS, free Tibet, and end oppression in Zimbabwe. For the purposes of our Gospel text today, let me refer to Tutu as Salt. Why? Mandela described him as “sometimes strident, often tender, never afraid and seldom without humor.” I hope you know someone with Tutu’s salty impish smile.

What difference can we make? we wonder. Jesus used basic essential elements of light and salt to describe the difference we all can make for God’s reign. You see, as Christians our good works are not to get somewhere with God, especially not inside pearly gates. Rather they testify abroad what God can do through us.

I’ve watched my salt more since losing my brother last Halloween. But have you noticed how bland food tastes with no salt? Just a few grains change everything. Jesus called his followers, his pedestrian gaggle of disciples, the salt of the earth. As for light, it can be fragile, yes, a flickering candle in the breeze. But even in small amounts—the flashlight on my phone—I can get home in the dark after late night meetings without breaking my ankle. And consider this in our dark time: the darker the darkness, the less light required to illumine the difference God makes.

Thomas Aquinas, speaking about our Christian variety of light, reminded us that our light is always reflected light. We’re more like the moon than the sun, he said. Jesus is the sun, the source of our light and we can only aspire to reflect his light.

In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” I believe it. But here in Matthew, in his most famous sermon, he says, “You’re the light of the world. Let your light shine before others.” We don’t much like that last part, our light shining before others. Why is that? We fail to realize we our light can shine without being proud, self-righteous or unctuously self-important. Do you recall Dr. Paul Smith, our preacher Under the Sacred Canopy last fall? More than once that weekend, I heard him asked what it was like to march in Selma. He smiled warmly *and didn’t answer*. He wasn’t into personal glory days, but the challenge we face right here and now. Paul offers his light to shine for the glory of God’s justice, not his fame.

So imagine with me Jesus’ little band of followers squatting with him in the dust, listening as he tells them, “I will take over the world with you. And God’s revolution for good begins today. And you are my special forces to defeat Rome. You!”

But here in our own time, no matter which side we are on, we increasingly feel like our own American homeland is becoming a dark impersonal, imperial force. Great is the restlessness of our people upon all sides. What can one person do?

The more secular we grow as a nation, the more the church’s witness is eclipsed, the more we look to government and politicians as our principal source of hope. But is that realistic? Casting powerful empires of any era in the role as champion of goodness and transformation? I reject that. Samuel Johnson said, “how small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or kings can cause or cure.”

Where do I find hope? I look to our Care Circle, for example. You've no idea how much this team of laypersons care or the difference they make wherever they go. Right now, our young church has four households battling cancer. We have a 35 year old mother of two who recently had a stroke. The Care Circle shows up time after time, instance after instance. They don't preach a sermon. They don't fix things with brilliant words of guidance. All they do is show up and walk alongside the hurting. They remind me that we're a genuine spiritual community, not a bus-load of tourists shaking our heads, quietly muttering, "What can one person do?"

I can say these same about those cooking and serving at the Open Shelter. If we all hope someday to be at ease in God's presence, you're our letter of reference.

Maybe we live in a world with so much darkness, so much loneliness, so much pain, even such small acts of regular people get magnified into greatness. Maybe this is how God works in the world, using plain folk like us, and letting seemingly menial acts of kindness to unfold into fresh miracles. We always think it takes the grand gesture or a mass movement to bring hope. But sometimes all it takes is the smile of a lawyer who has suffered much; the tea he offers to an adversary; the tip of a powerful man's hat to a powerless woman. Such simple actions of ordinary people are the light and salt we can trust to bring incredible transformation.

I don't know about the world anymore. I don't know about the United States of America now. I do know this. Churches like ours, for all of our limitations and characters, are God's answer for what is wrong with the world. We are about to approach a table where that will remind us that we are Christ's body in the world.

We are not the source of light, but we reflect the light of our Savior. You, as you are in this time and place--beloved of God despite yourselves—you're Jesus' salt to heal wounds, to give savor to spirits who have gone bland. You are Christ's shining light so others can see Jesus as God's way, God's truth, and God's life.

So let me end my sermon like this. Would Marian, Bob, and Polly come forward?