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Do recall the statistics about a child's self-esteem in relation to the messages they hear? Psychologists suggest that for every negative message children hear about themselves, they need to hear ten positive ones to restore their sense of self-esteem to where it had been previously.

Children become what they are named. Call a child bad long enough, and he or she will believe you and act bad. Call a child (or teen or adult for that matter) worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she – all of us! – will live into the name we've been assigned. In the same way, call us good or useful, dependable, helpful, or worthwhile, and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well.

Jesus in his teaching could both be affirming of the individual and yet challenge the person's behavior. Jesus accepted the rich young man, but challenged him to give away his possessions. He accepted the woman caught in adultery and then instructed her to sin no more.

We might say that the affirmation of the person recognizes their dignity, while the challenge is for a behavioral change for the better. Both teachings are required for effective ministry – law and gospel. We encounter these moments in order to grow - spiritually and personally.

If we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we might envision him with a staff looking out over the flock. There are two ends to the shepherds' staff – one is a hook to hold a person close to the flock and the pointed end in order to prod and encourage. That's the affirmation and challenge that Jesus presents to us today. Challenge leads to change and that leads to growth and preservation. Jesus is not only speaking to the 12 – but to all disciples. WE are both affirmed and challenged.

**You are the salt of the earth** – Jesus said. He named the disciples a sturdy, vital element in the life of the world. Salt can be used for lots of things and really there is no substitute for it. Salt is used to alter or enhance the tastes of food. On the other hand, Salt can mix with other substances in such a way that its strength is diluted and it becomes ineffective.

In other words, the disciples might make so many compromises in order not to offend anyone, that they become ineffective as disciples.

We have heard that we are "the salt of the earth". When we try to describe a person we find especially good, we say that she or he is the "salt of the earth." We mean not only that they are "good," but that they are *very good*. We mean that without these people, life would lose its flavor. While you might survive without these kinds of people, you would not flourish for very long.

The same thing is true for the church. A community without salt is like a rose bush without the roses: it may be alive but it is not flourishing and, even more tragic, it is no better and actually much worse than a weed. Like salt that has lost its saltiness, it is trampled under foot. By contrast, a rose that flourishes is beautiful and fragrant.

What the metaphor of salt seems to be after is the *intensity* of our being in fellowship with Christ in the world. Some one once said, "We can perhaps catch its force better by substituting another seasoning: '**You are red hot pepper for the whole earth!**' When we think of it this way, we are reminded that 'You must add zest to the life of the whole world.'"

The danger for disciples is that they might lose their saltiness. That's the danger for us too – we sometimes get too comfortable in our faith. We forget that Christians are to disorder the status quo by lifting up those who are oppressed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, and courageously standing for what we believe. Disciples who don't engage in these things will be like salt that has lost its taste.

WE are to bring the zest of 'hot peppers' to our relationships with each other and the world. Salt has an edge as well as a satisfying taste. It makes food come alive that would otherwise seem tasteless and bland. And Salt can be used as a preservative, keeping food fresh for an extended period of time. Salt is also used to stimulate thirst. All these metaphors pertain to discipleship. Bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to people in such a way that it enhances life – that it draws attention – that life is changed because of our witness. In all these

cases salt is not an element useful to itself. Its value comes in its use on and **with** other things. So it is with the followers of Jesus who are called to exist for others in the name of Christ.

(PAUSE)

Jesus goes on in the same way when he speaks about light. **We are the light of the world.** Light enables us to see clearly and with vivid color. Sunlight is essential to help vegetation to grow and to provide solar power for electricity. A small laser shined in the eyes of a pilot in a cockpit can bring that plane crashing to earth. Light is powerful and essential. We are that light – shining in the world for Jesus Christ.

The disciples are like light shining in a mirror that reflects the light of Christ so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy. As a gathered community the disciples are like light when they engage others in the world, enabling diversity, nurturing a healthy friendly world, generating policies for eco justice and restoring or repairing whatever relationships that need them require. These are the good works that will glorify God.

All of these can be symbolized by light and result in "good working". But these are "good" only if they reflect God and not human ability. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.

Matthew says, in so many words, "You don't light a candle and then put it under a bowl. You put the candle in a place where it shines freely." The light of this community will not be swallowed up in the black hole of greedy ambition or fearful apprehensions of scarcity. Rather, the business of the community will be illuminated (and sometimes exposed) by "the light of the world".

Another aspect of light is one that we have often used to encourage someone to step forward, to relinquish shyness and to come out of hiding. There is another reason for the light to shine. There is darkness in life – both external and internal. Jesus encourages us to bring the light of Christ to shine in any darkness. In order for the light to be seen we must be willing to go where the darkness exists, to engage and walk through it, so that in time the light can overcome the darkness. We must go into those dark places, bearing the light of Christ. The

light is not given for our own personal enjoyment. We do need to look at the darkness within ourselves so that it is exposed to the light of Christ as well. WE cannot bring the light of Christ to others if we are unaware of where that light needs to shine in our own hearts.

Christians are called to show concern about their spiritual life in such a way that it actually gives cause to others to rejoice over them!

The images of "salt" and "light" evoke all kinds of pictures for us just as they sparked the imagination of Jesus' listeners. They may well represent more than one meaning. Jesus gives them more specific substance in what follows when he finally says, Take up your cross and follow me.

Each of us has been called salt and light – and we each are called to be used for by Christ for the redemption of the world in our unique God-given ways. And we do them with joy. Not all those things to which we've been called will be easy, but if we are salt and light we will do them for the sake of the Gospel. For example, praying for one's neighbors and friends may be a good thing, praying for one's enemies is likely to raise a few eyebrows during the prayers of the people. If we were to enter the narrow way of Jesus, who says, "Take up your cross and follow me," it is more than likely that our hearts will skip a time or two – if we truly are to be salt and light for the world. Amen.