

Every year I have the confirmation kids go through a series of questions, questions that they should know, that they should be able to answer if somebody was going to ask them. Questions like "Who is God," or "What does 'trinity' mean," or "What are the Ten Commandments?" But there's also one more question that is on that list that they should know, and that we should all know, for that matter: "What does holiness mean? What does it mean to be sanctified?" Of course, the answer that I have the kids give is that we would be different from the world and that we would be like God. In other words, being holy means that we are called to live as Christians and to not live the way that the world does. But the question that I want to ask today is a little bit different, because that is the answer to the question of what holiness is. But today I want to ask: why should we be holy? Why should we seek to be like God and to be different from the world? Jesus shows us why in our Gospel reading for today.

Now, I know Jesus doesn't actually use the word "holy" anywhere in the Gospel reading, but honestly he doesn't have to, because he's still talking about it. He's just using a couple of different pictures to do it. And the first thing that he says is that he compares us to salt. Jesus says in verse 13 of our reading: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

Now, I know salt doesn't really mean that much to us today, mostly because it's so easy for us to get it. If I were to go to the store, for example, I could get a fairly large amount of salt for a dollar or two. And even the exotic salts are rarely more than ten dollars. They're usually much less than that. So salt is something that we can get quite easily. And if we think about it at all, it's usually only to think about how we have too much of it, how we eat too much of it. And so we can miss, for that reason, some of what Jesus has to say here when he calls us the salt of the earth.

But salt in Jesus' time was extremely important for a few different reasons. First of all, as a way to preserve food. Because they didn't have refrigerators. They didn't have freezers. And certain kinds of food could only be kept for long periods of time by putting it into salt. If you didn't eat meat right away, for example, you had to salt it so that you had it for the times ahead. So salt was just as important to them as our fridges and freezers are to us.

Salt was also important because it was involved in the worship of God in the Old Testament. Leviticus chapter 2 says: "You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." So that's how important it was. It was central to the worship of God. In fact, a grain offering would be rejected if it didn't have salt with it. So it was always on their minds. It was central to the worship of God.

But, lastly, and perhaps most importantly, even though salt was so important, it was also very expensive. Because the only way you could really get salt in those days was by evaporating seawater. Their salt was what we call sea salt today. And if you didn't live next to the coast, you had to have it imported. And just like anything that is imported, it's going to be a lot more expensive because of it. We might say if something is valuable that it's worth its weight in gold. But the ancients would say that it was worth its weight in salt. In fact, our words "salary" comes from salt. The Latin word for salt is "sal," so a "salary" is the money that you would give to

somebody so that they would be able to buy salt. That just goes to show just how important it was. And all of these reasons together show why salt was so important to the people in Jesus' time.

But as Jesus says, salt is really only valuable when it is salt. If it's anything less than what it is, it becomes worthless. Because what good is salt if it is not salt? What could you use it for? Hardly anything at all. Salt that is salt is good for many things: to flavor your food, to preserve food, to cure things, and so forth. It has to be what it is in order to be of any value to the world. It has to be salt and nothing less if it is going to be good to the world. But that's exactly Jesus' point. That's why he compares us to salt. Because when we live as Christians, when we are the Christians that we have been called to be, then we are good for the world. We are a benefit to those who are around us. But if we are anything less than that, then we are not good for anything.

Let me put it this way so that we understand what Jesus is saying here. Salt is valuable because of how it changes things, because of how it influences everything else. Salt all by itself isn't worth much. We don't buy salt just to have it around the house. We buy it to flavor things, we buy it to preserve things, and so forth. It's good because of what it does to other things. And the same is true of being a Christian. We are called to be holy, not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those around us. When I act like God, then I am good for the world, then I am good to those who are around me. But if I am not holy, then how can I be good? And if I'm only holy for myself, what good is that either? We are called to be salt, Christians. We are called to be holy for the good of those who are around us.

The other picture that Jesus uses today is that of light. He says in verse 14: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." So if Jesus compares us to salt to show that we should not be less than what we are, Jesus compares us to light to show that we should not hide what we are either. Because light cannot be hidden. Just go out at night sometime. Look up into the sky and see the moon and the stars. Even though it might be completely dark outside, even though it might be the middle of the night, you're still going to see them. Even if there's clouds, light is still going to come through, because you can't hide light. Or take a very small light. It could be the smallest light you can imagine. Stick it into a dark room. It doesn't matter how small it is. It doesn't matter where it is. You are going to see it, because you can't hide it. There is no darkness that can ever overwhelm light, no matter how small it might be.

And being holy is like light, Christians. It is not something that can be hidden. And what good is it to try to hide it anyway? What good is light that we try to hide away? It doesn't serve anybody any good. It'd be like a candle that we light during a power outage, only to leave it behind. What good is the candle? Or a spotlight that we turn on at night, but we leave it face down on the seat the whole time. What good does that do anybody? So why should we try to hide the fact that we are Christians? We are called to be light in the midst of darkness. We are called to be simply who we are.

And like salt, light is good because of how it affects other things. If I just have light for myself, if I am light only for myself, I might as well just be under a basket. But we are light for a purpose. Jesus again says, verse 16: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." So we should let our light

shine, not so that other people would admire us and say how good we are, but we should let our light shine so that they would see God through us. So they would see the light of God, and maybe even come to know him by faith. Being a Christian is like being a beacon in the midst of a world darkened by sin, so that others would see that beacon and find their way home. Being a Christian is like a lighthouse shining out over the sea, so that ships who are in danger can be saved from that danger and live. Being a Christian is like a spotlight focusing all of its light on one place, so that by shining on God, others may look to him and come to know him. That is why we are holy, Christians. That is why we are called to be holy, so that the world sees God through us. And they may even come to know him and be saved.

So with all that in mind, then, we should ask ourselves: why, then, would we try to be like the world? What good would that do? The world is already full of worldly people. It doesn't need one more. How would being like them change anything? Why should we be silent when we need to speak the truth of God's Word? How is that a benefit to anyone? Or why should we try to hide who we are as Christians just to avoid an argument or to avoid some unpleasant feelings? How does that help anyone? Christians, don't be ashamed of who you are. Don't be ashamed of who God has made you to be. Even if the world hates it, even if the world attacks you because of it, be like God in everything.

Because this is also how God calls people out of the world. This is how he calls people to himself. You are God's salt in a saltless world. You are God's light in a world darkened by sin. Whenever you speak, God has promised to speak through you. Whenever you act, God acts through you. You are his hands. You are his feet. You are his mouth to the world. Don't be less than what you are, Christians! Be like God for the sake of God. That is why we are called to be different from the world.

So Christians, be salt. Let your light shine before others, so that they too would see the light of God and be saved.

Let us pray. Our Father who is in heaven, who has set apart your people to be a blessing to the world, lead us to do what is right in your sight in all things, so that those around us would see our good works and give glory to you both now and in eternity; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.