

# ***This Is First Church***

“Who We Are To The Community”

Sunday, September 25

“I didn’t know who else to call”. Those were the words of one of our preschool moms who called up Karen last week. Her husband had left her and was not doing anything to continue supporting the family. Unfortunately that meant her son, on top of having a father suddenly abandon the family, was also going to have to drop out of preschool since she could no longer afford the tuition. “I didn’t know who else to call.”

How should we respond? What kind of church are we anyway?

In the next few minutes, I’m hoping to show you that our identity as a church is shaped by how we serve people. When asking the question “who are we”, or “what is our purpose”, the answer can be found by listening to the stories of the people we serve.

Before you leave today, I want you to feel encouraged by who this church is and I want you to feel inspired to join us in fulfilling our purpose by doing the work of God’s kingdom right here in Crystal Lake.

Before we talk about who we are, specifically, let’s look at what Jesus calls us *all* to be. I would like to draw a straight line between Jesus’ audience in Matthew 5, a large crowd of followers, and his followers today, you and I.

In the passage that Lauren read for us - we refer to that as the beatitudes meaning supreme blessedness, Jesus makes a startling pronouncement to this crowd of people and in doing so, he coins a phrase that we still use today.. To the poor, the meek, those who mourn, those who are merciful and make peace...they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

What Jesus said was revolutionary to his audience, but that usually goes right over our heads. In Jesus’ day, it would have been thought that the powerful, the rich, the healthy, the prosperous were the ones inheriting the kingdom of God. They were the ones entrusted with the preservation of God’s people and God’s word. They were the “firsts” in the way people ranked and judged one another. The logic was...why else would they be having such a great life?

Likewise in Jesus’ day, it was thought that if you were poor it was because you could not keep the letter of the law. If you were sick it was because of your sin, or your parents’ sin. The rich must have been righteous - why else would they have all that wealth? The pious had power and influence - they were blessed by God.

Jesus flips the script and suggests that it’s the ordinary and inconsequential that are held in God’s highest esteem. But Jesus’ early followers were just commoners. They were not the rich

and powerful, they were everyday people. He called them the salt of the earth, and the light of the world.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote: "This title had been given by the Jews to certain of their eminent Rabbis. With great pomposity they spoke of Rabbi Judah, or Rabbi Jochanan, as the lamps of the universe, the lights of the world. It must have sounded strangely in the ears of the Scribes and Pharisees to hear that same title, in all soberness, applied to a few bronzed-faced and horny-handed peasants and fishermen, who had become disciples of Jesus."

Back in May, I spent a week with some friends from First Church - some are here today - doing some work at homes in Slidell, LA. These homes had been badly damaged by Hurricanes Katrina, or Isaac. In the house that I worked at, we were replacing floors and they assigned me to the laundry room which also had a toilet in it.

The whole time I was working, I had this sinking feeling that things were not right - that I was doing everything wrong and this family would have a poorly installed, worthless floor when it was finished. I don't know anything about that kind of work. I don't know the difference between floor and sub-floor. I don't know what materials we're working with, and I don't even know the names of the tools I was using. It seemed insane to me that they'd entrust me to do the work with only a little oversight and instruction.

It just seemed so risky to leave that responsibility with me. And yet, this is exactly what God does concerning the most important work of the Kingdom - he entrusts it to ordinary folk, salt of the earth, just like you and me who are unqualified, untrained, and prone to failure, rejection and even persecution. Why? Because God delights in the ordinary, the left-out, low-born, the unqualified, the disqualified, and disillusioned. His kingdom is FULL of those kinds of people and they are blessed to belong, and blessed to do his will.

Way back in Genesis, when God first calls his people - a tribe of nomads of no significance whatsoever - he lays out this simple plan (Genesis 12:2-3):

"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you."

They weren't called because they were special. They were special because they were called.

When Jesus tells people you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he's not talking about the religious elite. He's not talking about the healthy, wealthy, and wise. It's not the religious professionals, but the farmers, fishers, tailors, blacksmiths, men and women and children. The nobodys, the plane janes, the average joes. The people who were considered unimportant in the eyes of humans, were the ones called to God's holy purposes.

They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We could spend all morning talking about all the unique properties of salt and light and how they create a wealth of parallels to the Christian life but I'd like to cut to the chase here: salt and light are useful. They have purpose. And it is in the context of usefulness that Jesus draws these parallels.

He says, what if a salt loses its saltiness? What if salt can't do the thing it exists to do? It's useless! It has no purpose other than to be thrown away. Likewise, who would light a lamp and then cover it with a bowl? That would defeat the purpose. It's purpose it to give light to everyone.

Jesus says, In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Ordinary people are not only blessed in God's Kingdom, but they are called to God's purposes, and when others see their good deeds, these ordinary people bear witness to the glory of God. I think this is why God recruits ordinary people to be light-bearers. I think ordinary people are more likely to do good deeds and be happy to let God get the credit.

When we engage in missions (the work of the kingdom), we bear witness to the glory of God. We put praise on the lips of those who see and hear and feel the love of Jesus. It shows them who God is. Who we are, is showing our neighbors who God is, by how we serve them. We are blessed to be a blessing!

Gary Waters, who preached last week, laid this idea out so beautifully. He said, when you have a God-given talent or ability, it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to all of us. We aren't the recipients of spiritual gifts, but they are given for the benefit of us all.

I used to concern myself with this question: I wonder how the community views our church. I wonder what their impression of First Church is. Only recently I think I'm finally ready to answer that question. I don't think they think about us at all. Those who are not already plugged into the life of First Church, who don't attend our services, who don't hear of our amazing music and preaching and ministries and kids programs and all that we do - they don't think about us. The greater Crystal Lake area's opinion of First Church is probably, overwhelmingly, "no opinion."

We may assume that because we are in Crystal Lake and have been for over 175 years, the community knows us and what we do and what we stand for. And maybe some do, but most don't. Most couldn't say where we're located let alone what our purpose is other than we're a church who does church-stuff...you know, Jesus and bingo nights and that kind of thing.

In August, we held our first Back2School Bash in partnership with Coventry School to make sure families had access to additional resources in getting their kids ready for classes starting. Here's some photos from that event.

One family in particular came in and was being a little shy about things. They weren't sure if and how much they should be taking. One of our volunteers who was helping, Jean, encouraged them to take what they needed, and in that exchange the father of this family asked her.

## **“Are you sure this is a church?”**

Now, if you know Jean, you already know that she's great with people and so while this guy's kids are out playing bozo buckets, Jean is telling him a bit about who we are and what we do. The man went on to share that his idea of church, what he understood to be the purpose of church, was one hour on Sunday morning. And that's it. He had no context in which he could place his idea with church and an actual church out there living out its mission.

His impression of church was salt that had no saltiness! A light that was placed under a bowl. A people without purpose, blessed only for themselves. His expectation of church was so far removed from Jesus' calling that he didn't even believe that any church would be doing what we were doing.

I just love that we got to show him otherwise!

Remember the woman at the beginning of this message? She says “I didn't know who else to call.” I'm glad she knew to call us, because what she didn't know is that we have scholarships set up for exactly this kind of scenario. So while her son's life is getting turned upside down, the church can at least stabilize one thing - he can stay at school, learning with his friends and his wonderful teachers. It's one less thing that mom has to worry about - because we've decided to be the salt and light that Jesus has called us to be.

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I once interviewed a woman named Tracy who now lives in the first home built on McHenry Ave. with Habitat for humanity. I asked her what she feels toward those who come out to build with her. She said, “I feel gratitude! Once this is done it won't just be a house, it's going to be our home. [I'm grateful] that people are giving up their time to come do it. I feel that every person who comes through the door here is helping me build my kids' future and my future.”

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O woman named Megan sent us an email after attending a Santa's Wonderland. It said “we didn't see a spot for donations, is there a way for us to make a donation as a thanks for everything you all did?”

We get this comment all the time: "This is Free?!" Yes it is because...

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Here's a message we received on Facebook about our Back2School bash:

"You'll never know how much the clothing, groceries and especially school supplies helped our family!

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Not long ago Coventry school reached out asking if we could help provide for a kid who needed special shoes. What kind of church are we anyway? Here's the thank you note from the staff:

"Thank you so very much for your generosity. This student will be able to walk and move around her community and school more easily. You are making a difference."

You know what I have to say about that? This is First Church!

Here's an email we received from a family who got to do our Buddy Break Day at Camp:

"I just wanted to send our most heartfelt thank you to you all at First Church, Phantom Ranch, the Nathaniel's Hope organization and all the amazing Buddy Break volunteers that made this past Saturday a magical day for our family. Our daughter, Liliana, had the best time and fell in love with rock climbing! One dad I was talking to said how nice everyone was and how refreshing it was to not get the eye rolls and judgmental looks he's become accustomed to. This has been a highlight of our summer and we feel truly blessed!"

Blessed to be a blessing. Say it with me: This is First Church!

The community will know us when we serve them. We are a part of this community when we share what we have with them. And what do we have to share? What is our greatest resource? Did you know that it's you? The best thing about First Church is our people. When we share of ourselves they'll know us and they'll know the love of God.

You don't have to be special, you have to be available:

If you have the time you can serve with us to be a blessing to our community

If you don't have time, then you have resources to share - give to our mission.

If you don't have resources, then you have a voice - advocate for what we do. Tell others how we can serve them.

If you don't have a voice, then you have a mind - pray for the ongoing work of our ministries.

This work is not unique to us at this church. It is what every follower of Jesus has been called to. We are the light of the world. I'm so proud that our church and the people take that calling seriously. I'm so grateful that we live out that part of our mission - sent to serve.

Have you swung a hammer at Habitat? Have you given out groceries at the Friday Food distribution? Have you been on a short-term mission trip? Have you played games with kids at Trunk or Treat? Have you helped people park at Santa's Wonderland? Have you been a blessing to someone - anyone - because Jesus has called you to do the work of his Kingdom in our community? Then you know...this is first church.

Some of you know Kevin Williams. He serves on our outreach committee and I think every time I talk to him I learn something new. He once told me: "I think deep down inside each and every one of us there is a desire, a need, something that's unfulfilled to make a difference in this world, and it's to do so in the lives of others."

This is what we do at First Church - we take what we have - our resources, our time, our voices, and our prayers and we bless the community. By our work, we are known, and God is praised. We are the light of the world. So let's go live like it! Would you please join me in prayer.