

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 5, 2023

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste....”

As you well know, genealogy seems to be really popular these days. We almost always see it on tv advert. Many people love doing ancestral detective work, love trying to see how far back they can trace their roots. It used to be enormously difficult to do, but these days it's quite a bit easier through the use of computers and electronic databases and such. Yet, for most families, going back more than a few generations requires a lot of effort and time, sometimes even requiring traveling to distant lands. But people do it nonetheless.

I've never been a genealogy person. And not because I'm not that interested in family or in history. It's not that at all. Actually I used to love hearing my grandparents tell stories of their parents and grandparents. I used to love to hear about where they came from, or what skills and jobs they had, or what their personalities were like. And I would often try to imagine what life would have been like in those times and places. No, the real reason I'm not that interested in genealogy is because after most of us go back a few generations all we know about the people are just their names and dates. None of the “good” stuff. None of the colorful details that paint a picture of a unique life. And when I see a detailed family tree on a big piece of paper especially here in the States, or on multiple pages on a computer screen I often get the sense that many of those names could simply be deleted from the chart and the “story” would be the same. Nothing different or unique. After all, they're only names and dates. In a certain sense I'm really asking

Would the world be the same if that person hadn't lived?

Some of us feel the exact same way when we see a cemetery. What do we really know about these people? What can be said of the lives they lived? If we've never heard their names ever before, could their lives have really mattered that much? Or after a few generations are they simply

forgotten, erased from history - with absolutely no real connection or lasting impact on you, me, or the world we live in? Am I still talking about those who have gone before us?

I think that many of us fear being one of those people, fear nearing the end of our lives and wondering if we made any difference at all, fear having come and gone with hardly anyone noticing. When we were young, many of us had big dreams. But then life happened, and these incredible, profound things we were going to do somehow didn't turn out as we had hoped. The "extraordinary" life we imagined for ourselves at twenty, suddenly looks quite "ordinary" by forty, looks quite a bit like countless others around us and countless others who have gone before us. Will someone someday see OUR name on a family tree, or see OUR marker or monument in a cemetery and wonder if OUR time here had made any difference?

"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste . . ."

It's not always easy to imagine that our relatively routine lives can change the world or change human hearts. It's not always self-evident. It actually takes faith, the kind of faith that acknowledges the power of our God-given freedom, the incredible power our choices have to shape the world around us. And that usually comes about through each and every encounter with each and every person who comes our way as we journey through life. And so the answer to the question, "Do our lives make any difference?" is a relatively easy one. Of course they do. The real question is . . .

What KIND of difference am I making? What KIND of impact will I have on the world? How would I be remembered in the next hundred years after my death?

The Gospel passage we just heard is a well-known one taken from the Sermon on the Mount, a sort of spiritual pep-talk early in Matthew's Gospel. The verses we just heard come only a few lines after the

Beatitudes, that challenging blueprint for a God-centered life spoken so eloquently by our Lord. And by using images of salt and light in today's gospel Jesus is trying to make sure his listeners, you and me, understand the profound impact they or we can have on the world (for good or bad). He knows that each of their lives, (our lives) is going to say something, and he wants to make sure that that "something" is good, holy and life-giving.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of salt and light in the time of Jesus. I guess when you don't have electricity or many safe ways of preserving food, these items aren't "extras" but "essentials", things people simply can't do without. (As you might know, salt was so precious in ancient times that it was sometimes used to pay Roman soldiers - hence our word "salary".)

Do we feel the same about ourselves? Are we precious in God's eyes? Is each of us, in a certain sense "essential" in our own individual way, each of us called to add an essential ingredient to the world that maybe only we can add - acts of love that God is counting on us to provide? And can we strive to make our unique contribution, our unique impact a positive one, a life-giving one, a God-centered one?

Or will we choose a different path, choose to add something else to the mix, choose to make this world a little less than the world God created it to be. God sure hopes not. He hopes for so much more. After all, he knows what is possible, he knows with certainty that we can be salt and light.

Do we have that same confidence? Is our hope the same as God's?