11th Sunday after Trinity
SERIES ON DISCIPLESHIP - SALT OF THE EARTH
West Henrietta - 1961
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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Some years ago a cartoon ~~appeared showing~~ has pictured a father and his son at a holiday resort. The angry father is tugging the ear of his tired and whimpering son and demanding, Now then, are you going to enjoy yourself or do I have to make you? The message of the cartoon was one everybody could readily understand. With new leasure and luxury on his hands, man was trying hard to have a good time - even if he had to force himself to do it. That spirit has by no means died out. People are still trying almost desperately to enjoy themselves at all costs, as though the goal and essence of life were: HAVE FUN! We have, however, reached a time in history when a cartoon with an altogether different message is more appropriate. The picture might be almost identical: an angry father tugging at the ear of his rebellious son. But they represent something quite different. The father might be regarded as God, and the undisiplined son as humanity. God is saying, You had better learn that life has its serious side. You cannot forever ignore and flout My will. Or do I have to teach you with overwhelming disaster? That announcement is not new to us. Modern history has been shouting it with increasing force. The era of pleasant optimism is far behind us. The time has come, not for hopeless pessimism, but for a realistic appraisal of how serious is the plight in which our world finds itself.

Ours is a decaying society. The moral tone of the world has been tumbling downhill. God's age-old rules of decency and honor, by which society prospers, are being violated by growing numbers on all levels of society. Immorality and unfaithfulness, crime and vice, drunkenness & debauchery are daily climbing to new heights. Parents are indifferent~~ly neglecting~~ to their God-given responsibility to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Children arrogantly fly in the face of all authority, as though it were no longer God's will that they honor and obey their parents and masters. Another a fellow pastor was recently telling me about a 16 year old girl who ran away with a 17 year old boy. The boy apparently had no

respect for his parents and succeeded in persuading ~~her~~ the girl that she should have none either. Unable to locate them, the girl's mother ~~has been~~ was almost frantic with grief and worry. No matter how we may try to disillusion ourselves, our society is rotting away from within.

It was into this same kind of decaying society that the Lord Jesus came. In the opening chapter of his letter to the Romans St. Paul described the immoral conditions of that day this way. Listen: Since they considered themselves too high and mighty to acknowledge God, He allowed them to become the slaves of their degenerate minds, and to perform unmentionable deeds. They became filled with wickedness, rottenness, greed and malice: their minds became steeped in envy, murder, quarrelsomeness, deceitfulness and spite... They scoffed at duty to parents; they mocked at learning, recognized no obligations of honor, lost all natural affection, and had no use for mercy. More than this - being well aware of God's pronouncement that all who do these things deserve to die, they not only continued their own practices, but did not hesitate to give their thorough approval to others who did the same. Sounds quite modern, doesn't it?

In His Sermon on the Mount Christ summoned His followers to keep the world from going to rot and decay. You are the salt of the earth, He said, but if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden underfoot of men.

We take salt for granted today. At the time of Christ, however, people spent a fortune in order to secure it. Salt was a scarce and valuable item. The soldier's pay was often in salt rather than in coin. Our word "salary" has its origin in that fact. Salt was almost the only known antiseptic. It was the only available preservative for food. When Christ said, You are the salt of the earth, He was telling His disciples that they were to be the means for keeping the world alive and healthy.

I imagine that this small group of people on the mountainside who heard Christ felt that He was asking the impossible. It must have seemed like a superhuman task for them to buck the tide of rot and decay. They were only common people. They had little

money and less education. They had no political power or prestige. They had built no organization. They could not throw their weight around in the halls of government. Nevertheless, Christ meant everything He said. The empire of that day is gone, although it ruled almost all the then-known world. It died because it rotted away. The schools of philosophy of that time, so influential and so powerful, are no more. The society of that time has passed into oblivion. But the Church of Jesus Christ remains. It became a salt in that world, a salt in the dark ages, a salt in the middle ages, a salt in the age of reason, a salt in the industrial age, and it must be a salt in our new atomic and space age. The faith of Christ has survived every war, every era, every revolution, wherever it has been what Christ intended it to be - the salt of the earth.

Faith in Christ has a savor all its own. It is a humble savor - nothing at all like the Pharisee in today's Gospel. To become a child of God by faith in Christ is to acknowledge your own unworthiness to stand in God's presence; being a child of God by faith means that you accept God's forgiveness freely offered out of the goodness of His heart for the sake of His Son Jesus Christ.

Christ was salt Himself. His salt had not lost its savor. It lent flavor and taste to everything it touched. The fact is that the savor of Christ shocked the taste of the world. His kindness earned Him criticism, and His holiness won Him death. He accepted it all willingly, because it was His savor to save - by His innocent death and by His resurrection from the grave - to redeem, to win back a world rushing headlong to decay and destruction. To those whose hearts have be touched by His amazing sacrifice for the sins of the world - to them Christ says You are the salt of the earth!

Christ did not ask His followers to pass the salt around. He demanded of them simply that they be salt. Salt does its own job, and you don't have to worry about it once it goes to work. Christian faith does its own job, and you ~~you~~ don't have to worry about it once it goes to work. In an old cemetery there is this inscription on a tombstone: His presence made bad men good. Stanley said of

Livingstone, He made me a Christian and never knew he was doing it. It has been said that Christians are to be in the world but not of the world. Salt does its job in the world - but it remains what it is, salt. Christ calls His followers to be what they profess to be - loyal and loving sons of God. Christian faith is not to be influenced by the world, but to influence the world. Christian faith must be at work in society, doing its job, lending savor, keeping the world alive. Christians are not merely spectators, sitting in the bleachers, sadly watching as the game of life goes against humanity. They are to be down on the playing field vigorously fighting against everything that is evil.

What then can we say about the "milk-and-mush" type of Christianity of so many in our day? They are not the salt of the earth. They act like anything but salt. Instead of being in the world to check its decay and deterioration, they become part of the decaying, dying world in which they live. Our Lord had this to say about that kind of Christianity, Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven. He also said: If the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. The insipid residue which many people today call faith is not faith at all. Mild Christianity is not only worthless; it is dangerous. The corruption of the best is always the worst. There is no remedy for it when God's salt goes bad. If Christ's men lose their characteristic tang - their faithfulness to the Gospel and their loyalty to the Cross of Christ - they become not merely useless but a corrupting and destroying influence in the world. If Christian people yield to the moral decay of our age, where can we find truth and honesty and uprightness?

Christ calls you to discipleship - to a profession of faith in Him and to the faithful practice of that profession. He would not have you think, however, that discipleship is an easy thing. It is hard, as His statement is hard: You are the salt of the earth. With its invitation to water down, compromise, and even surrender one's principles - life has a way of washing out faith. Against these

temptations Christ asks ~~His followers~~ you to stand, to stand firmly, to stand like the Rock of Gibraltar. Unless ~~they~~ you stand for what ~~they~~ you believe, ~~their~~ your faith will be good for nothing. Christ expects His followers to buck the tide of easy-going morality and to take the unpopular stand, if that means to stand up for God, His will, and His way. Wherever you may be, in the home, in the school, in the factory, in the place of business, among your friends, among your neighbors, among any with whom you may come into contact, let your Christian influence and example be felt. You are the salt of the earth. God help you!

Amen.