

“MAKING A DIFFERENCE”

Matthew 5:13-20

Crossings Conference

Homily 2

January 23, 2012

Evening Prayer

Have you ever eaten french fries without salt? They are bland potatoes. Have you ever lost your electric power in a storm? Groping around in the dark tripping over furniture is no fun. Salt and light make a difference.

Jesus uses both images to portray the difference his disciples make in the world. We are salt transforming bland potatoes into hot, juicy French fries. We are light in a dark room transforming a dangerous, cluttered trap into a relaxing, beautiful space.

Really? Can Jesus be serious? Can this be true . . . that the world would lose its zest without us? . . . that our neighborhoods, communities and places of work would be boringly insipid without us?

One morning an elderly man was walking on a nearly deserted beach. He came upon a boy surrounded by thousands and thousands of starfish. As eagerly as he could, the youngster was picking them up and throwing them back into the ocean.

Puzzled, the older man looked at the young boy and asked, "Little boy, what are you doing?"

The youth responded without looking up, "I'm trying to save these starfish, sir."

The old man chuckled aloud, and queried, "Son, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"

Holding a starfish in his hand, the boy turned to the man and, gently tossing the starfish into the water, said, "It will make a difference to that one!"

How often have we not just kept walking down the beach? Tossing one starfish back into the sea, when thousands remain, seems futile. But Jesus doesn't back off. He only piles on.

We shudder. It sounds like Jesus has a “zero tolerance policy.”

Jesus seems to toy with us. On the one hand, he thumbs his nose at God's “zero tolerance policy,” breaking the rules, hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, daring to forgive them on behalf of God. On the other hand, he is a thundering prophet hammering us for our hypocrisy, insisting on the very “zero tolerance policy” he just defied.

What gives here? Is Jesus FOR the Law or AGAINST the Law?

Jesus is FOR the Law SO THAT ultimately He can be AGAINST the Law. Jesus does not just “blow off” the Law and its demands. Jesus reminds us that God is not the sleepy old man in the sky who really doesn’t care if we are good and bad, because He will let us off the hook anyway. No. God cares about right and wrong. God cares about the Law and the prophets.

Jesus reminds us that God is not going to fudge on the Law. In fact, Jesus has come on behalf of God to “fulfill” the Law, to properly use the Law, . . . by not letting us off the hook, reminding us that we are not God, telling us the truth we don’t want to hear. Jesus is “tough love.”

At the same time, Jesus joins us under the law, befriending us “zero tolerance” breakers, bearing our sin, carrying our sorrows and hurts all the way to the cross. There he “suffers” the fate that all us “zero tolerance” breakers must suffer.

When Jesus died and breathed his last, God’s Law was fulfilled. The Law had done its thing. “Zero tolerance” breakers would not be tolerated, . . . even Jesus. But God raised Jesus from the dead because God was determined that **Jesus would be the difference maker** and not the Law. Love would have the last word. Sinners would be forgiven. The accusations of the Law would be silenced.

Jesus says something truly extraordinary to this rag-tag bunch of followers sitting there with their toothless grins and calloused hands, who under the Law did not amount to much. “You ARE the salt of the earth. . . . You ARE the light of the world. You ARE difference makers.” He does NOT say, “You CAN BE salt and light or you OUGHT TO be salt and light IF you really try hard to do this or that.” No. This is an incredible, flat out, unconditional declaration of a new world. Jesus gives them . . . and us . . . the-no-strings-attached . . . Kingdom of Heaven.

Because JESUS IS THE DIFFERENCE MAKER, we also GET TO make a difference. Because of Jesus, we ARE salt and light. We GET TO salt and lighten the world. That IS who we ARE.

Have you ever noticed how salt and light make a difference not by calling attention to themselves but always by pointing away from themselves? They exist for others. When we salt our favorite meat, salt brings out the flavor of the meat. When the salt calls attention to itself instead of the meat, we say that it is “too salty.” The same is true of light. The light exists for the sake of what it illumines. Turn on a light in a dark room, we look at the room. We don’t stare at the light bulb.

As salt and light, we GET TO bless others. Our good works are not about us. We don’t need good works to show what great salt and light we are. Our neighbors need our good works. Our good works season and brighten a world that has become bland and tasteless. They bring zest to the lives of those laboring in the drudgery of the daily grind.

They bring light to the darkness of those grieving a wounded world. They point to our God who in Christ has **made all the difference in the world.**