

Matthew 5:13-16

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Made to Be Different

Today we conclude our worship series, “It’s Awesome to Be Me,” by exploring our uniqueness and how that uniqueness has a special place in the world at large.

Last week a few of our young(er) families had worship outdoors at Turtle Back Zoo while Karen and Carol and many of you gathered here to worship God, and both gatherings were church in the true sense, because God was worshiped and glorified in each setting. The theme was JOY, and how God created us to be joyful.

For those gathered here is was the joy that comes through music, I heard that one of you asked, “Why can’t we do this more often?” Well we can and we should; God wants our worship to be joyful!

For those gathered at Turtle Back Zoo it was a celebration of creation; what attracts us to a zoo is joy we get from seeing the beauty of creation – the amazing diversity of nature and the harmony in which God created the world. Minister Jason emphasized that it is part of God’s plan for us to be amazed, in awe, and to rejoice at this great biosphere in which we live.

Today I want to explore the flip side of that diversity that our young families celebrated last week by celebrating our own uniqueness.

And to recognize how *different* we are from one another it’s helpful to look at identical twins, precisely those people we might expect to be *the same* in many ways. Yet identical twins grow up in different ways. The most famous twins in the Bible, Jacob and Esau, are described as having very different personalities; Esau was a huntsman, skilled with the bow and arrow, while Jacob was a homebody who liked to cook. Esau was a pappa’s boy while Jacob was mamma’s boy. God proclaims that both Jacob and Esau will be the fathers of great nations; Jacob became the father of the Israelites while Esau became the father of the Edomites who occupied the land that is now Jordan. The point is that they were very different despite the fact that they shared the same parents, the same food, and pretty much the same customs.

And it wasn’t just the way that outside forces acted upon Jacob and Esau that made them different; the differences existed from the womb. And as each of them grew up, the differences that existed from the beginning caused them to go in different directions, to make different choices to shape them into who they were and who they would become.

The same is true of you and me. Despite all that we may have in common we are very different in outlook, in interests, in personality. And the first thing I want you to appreciate is that you are special! God took great care to make you the way you are today. The Psalmist writes, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Another way to translate the Hebrew word for “fearfully” is “awesomely.” Yes, I am AWESOMELY made, and that is certainly a reason to praise God.

And this is important, both the praising God part and the recognizing our own awesomeness part. Because sometimes we forget one or the other both.

- Some people who may have disabilities or medical conditions fail to recognize that they are awesomely made nonetheless. But they focus on their limitations and then find little reason to praise God.
- Some people are smart, beautiful, handsome, charming, “ripped”, and awesome in many ways, but they forget to praise God for it. They think that they deserve the credit for what they have.
- We have to be perpetually cognizant of God’s goodness in giving us life as we have it, whatever our strengths and our limitations. We ought to praise God always for the awesome way that we have been created as unique individuals.

Which brings me to those limitations. We all have them. One of my good friends is a pastor who has a very quick wit. And he is incredibly popular with teenagers; he loves to joke around, to play, to wrestle with them. He’s a really fun guy to be around. And sometimes I want to be like him – in part because I want to see the youth of our church enjoying church and being active in church, but in part I’m jealous of him. I want to be that quick-witted, that fun-to-be-around. And deep down I want to get as much positive attention as he does. And what God has been teaching me is that I need to stop trying to be something I am not and start praising God for who I am.

Furthermore, we should look at our limitations as blessings. It reminds me of what the Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Corinth. He tells us of a “thorn in the flesh” that he has that, he says, prevents him from being too elated – it’s interesting that the Greek word Paul uses for “elated” can be translated as *haughty* or *boastful*. Paul has some affliction, and he asks Jesus to remove it. And Jesus tells Paul two things:

1. My grace is sufficient for you.
2. For my strength is made perfect in weakness.

What’s so great about our limitations? What’s so good about our “disabilities”? The answer is that they offer an opportunity for Jesus’ strength to be witnessed. And the strength I’m talking about is not just some superhero strength to woo us or make us say, “Wow, that was amazing!” No, the strength I’m talking about is the strength of God’s love that can be seen when others,

moved by God's love, come to your side and help you. A child who is suffering from leukemia inspires a team of medical researchers to search for a cure. The struggles faced by people who are physically challenged inspires legislation that requires public buildings to install facilities that accommodate them. God's love is in action when we address one another's needs, and so the needs become opportunities for God's love to shine forth as we minister to one another according to our strengths and our weaknesses. I may not have the spontaneity or wit that my friend has, but I have other strengths that I can use to glorify God by loving others. Likewise *you* may not have the same gifts and abilities that I have, but you have gifts and abilities that I *don't* have, and others stand to benefit when you share those gifts and abilities as you are led in Christ's love.

And that's what I glean from today's scripture passage. Jesus is telling us how wonderfully we are, not just as individuals but as humans who are made in the image of God. He intentionally uses the metaphors of salt and light; when you think of salt you don't imagine a single grain of salt but a lot of salt all together. When you think of light you don't think of individual photons but as the effect of many photons. So it is with us as a community. Each of us is uniquely and awesomely made, but we are made to be part of a greater whole with a greater purpose than our own individual cares and concerns. We're made to address each other's needs and concerns in love.