

Making a Difference

The Complete Series



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A two-part look at being a “Difference Maker”.

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un-churched people in Southwest Portland. We're building a bridge because we want them to come. We want them come and celebrate God's love; we want them to gather to grow in Christ; we want them to be sent out by the Spirit—to serve God by serving others.

We are on the edge of a new day in our church's life—new people, new ideas, new energies, new vision, God-given vision, God-breathed life. These are exciting days; these are challenging days. I urge you to give yourself to this emerging vision. Let's pray...

Out of the Saltshaker, Into the World

(Zechariah; Matthew 5:13-14)

Over the next two Sundays I want to talk with you about something that lies right at the heart of where Patty and I see this church heading in the next couple of years. And that is the idea of being a “Difference Maker.” We earnestly pray that every person who considers himself or herself part of this church family—whether you are an official member or not—will come to see yourself as a difference maker. Nobody is picked to be on a team and then wants to sit on the bench. Nobody gives a gift to somebody else and then hopes they never open it. Nobody devotes years of service to a company and then hopes that when they retire, nobody will notice. Nobody dreams of dying and then having a funeral at which no one shows up. We all want to make a difference...and not just for ourselves.

Nobody hopes that at their memorial service someone will stand up and say, “He worked hard to be successful—a real workaholic. He was anxious and driven and self-preoccupied.” I don't think so. When our time on this earth is up, we hope others will say, “She walked on planet earth for a while and made a difference. He changed my life.” We don't want to be space-takers. We want to be Difference Makers. And that desire to make a difference is not a bad thing. It is one of the most important things about you. You were created to want to count for something—to want to matter. It's in your spiritual DNA.

Did everybody here get some salt when you came in? Just hang onto it for a little bit, if you would. If you're visiting, you might be wondering, “Is this some kind of Presbyterian thing? Do they give out a different condiment every week? Next week it will be ketchup.” The reason you received a little salt shaker is to remember something very important that Jesus said. One day he gathered a group of his students around him and said: ***You are the salt of the earth.*** (Matthew 5:13) To understand what he meant by this, you have to understand how the use of salt has changed from the ancient world on up to today.

Does anyone know what the number one use of salt is in the United States? Some of you are going to say, “French fries,” but that's not the answer I'm look for. More than 51% of all salt that is produced in this country is used to de-ice roads. Those of us who live in the Pacific Northwest don't need to do that to our roads very often. In Western Oregon and even in Palestine, where Jesus lived, there are few places where roads get covered by ice and snow. Minnesota, where I'm from, is another story. Our cars would rust out because we used so much salt on our streets during the winter.

But in the ancient world, salt had a very different use: it was *a important preservative*. It kept decay and corruption from setting in. Dead bodies were preserved with it. Long before freezers and refrigerators or even canning jars were invented people used salt to preserve their meats, fruits, and vegetables. They found that they could store up food for times of famine, so that it literally contributed to an outcome of life or death.

They discovered that it was also *a purifying agent*, because it destroys bacteria. They discovered that it brings delight to people who are eating, because there are special taste buds on your tongue that are designed to respond to salt. So salt became highly prized.

In the Roman army a soldier's pay included an amount of salt. The word "salary" comes from the Roman word "salarium" which means "allowance of salt." That's where we get the expression, "He (she) is worth their salt. People went to war over salt. In fact, that's why we say, when one country is attacked, that it has been "assaulted." (I just made that one up!) But seriously, in the ancient world covenants or treaties were often ratified by the exchange of salt. It symbolized the endurance and faithfulness both partners would show to the covenant. Plato said that salt was: "dear to the gods." Homer said that it was: "a divine substance." It was a prized substance with a distinct purpose.

So when Jesus is talking to an undistinguished, uneducated group, he uses an illustration they will easily understand. Everybody knew its power to protect and preserve. But here's the jolt. Jesus says to them, ***You are the salt of the earth***. You. He tells them he is depending on them to accomplish his work. He is depending upon his followers to purify society and bring it whatever flavor and zest it's going to have.

When you examine the properties of salt, one of the things you discover is that: **Salt does not exist for its own sake.**

When was the last time that you went to someone's home for a meal and said to your spouse, "Honey, this is great salt. Why don't we have salt like this at home? We should switch brands." Generally speaking, salt is salt. It doesn't call attention to itself. Salt's calling is to lose itself in something more glorious than itself, and then it has fulfilled its destiny. So Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth.

A second thing about salt is that if it is going to be able to do its thing it has to get out of the shaker. Salt doesn't do anyone any good if it's kept on the shelf. If it's to do any good, it has to come out. It isn't meant for the shaker; it's meant for the world. It's only when you get poured out, that you will be a Difference Maker who can help change the world.

When you have a vested interest in a vision you're going to be more committed to that vision; you'll make a bigger sacrifice for that vision. So let me ask you a pointed question: What if every member of St. Andrew's supported the church just like you do? What kind of a church would we have? What if every single member served the church, attended church, and gave to the church exactly as you do? What kind of a church would St. Andrew's be?

So, here's something else we learn from this story of Nehemiah...**5. They encountered enthusiasm busters.** Let me hit this very quickly. When the people began their project, there were what you might call naysayers and critics. Look at the beginning of chapter 4: "When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the people and said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble-burned as they are?' Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, 'What they are building, if even a fox climbed on it, he would break down their walls of stone.'" (4:1-3 NIV)

If you're not careful, naysayers and critics can absolutely drain the enthusiasm right out of a vision. And I know that you might find this hard to believe but some of those kinds of people actually go to church. I like this definition of a Christian—"One who is completely fearless, continually cheerful, and constantly in trouble!"

Very quickly, we have two more things to notice in this story. **6. The people sacrificed for the vision.** At the end of chapter 7 we see how people began stepping up to help financially with the work. I truly believe that if you ever want to accomplish anything great there will always be sacrifice. Our RENEW campaign has a little motto: Not Equal Gifts, But Equal Sacrifice. "Sacrifice is being willing to give up something of value in order to allow something of greater value to happen."

Here's the final point we learn from this story...**6. The people celebrated what God had accomplished through them.** If you jump ahead to chapter 12 you learn that in just 52 days they rebuilt the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem. Then they had a celebration. The text says "the sound of rejoicing could be heard from far away." They celebrated what God had done through them.

Now, you've probably already made the connection between Nehemiah's story and the story of St. Andrew's. The circumstances are very different, but many of the principals still apply. Of course, we're not re-building a wall, but a bridge that will change lives; a bridge to new generations and to

don't need you." It is the awareness of that truth that will motivate a church to be a difference-maker.

3. Leadership was the example, not the exception. In the next few verses you see leaders up to their elbows in the work side by side with everyone else. They weren't out bossing everyone around or handing down orders from on high; they were involved. The airline company Jetblue recently began offering service from Portland to New York. Recently just before takeoff, this middle aged man, with graying hair, climbed aboard one of their planes and stood up in front of the passengers. He was wearing an apron but he wasn't a flight attendant. He proceeded to introduce himself as the CEO of Jetblue Airlines. Then he told the passengers he was going to serve them some snacks and pass out some blankets and that he wanted to speak personally with each passenger. That's servant leadership. I can tell you that the elders, the deacons the members of the RENEW team, those on the staff of this church are all servant leaders.

You see, the church is not like a school bus, where most of the people ride in the back while the bus driver does all the work. The real church is like an ant hill where each person is busily going about their tasks and everybody is involved.

So, here's the fourth way the people of Jerusalem accomplished their mission: **4. They had a vested interest in the vision.** If you look at some of the later verses in chapter three you notice that Nehemiah had assigned people to repair the parts of the wall that were nearest to where they lived. He understood the principle of self-interest. He asked each person, each family unit to work on a section of the wall or a gate that was closest to their heart. That's where their passion and interest was naturally directed.

There's a story about a wealthy nobleman who decided he would build a church for the people in a mountain village in Europe. At its grand opening, the people of the village gathered and marveled at the beauty of their new church. It seemed everything had been thought of and carefully planned. Just then someone walked into the sanctuary and said, "Wait a minute. Where are the lamps? It's really dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some little alcoves in the walls; he then took out a lamp and gave it to each family. Then he told them that they were to bring the lamp with them when they came to worship. "Each time you are here," the nobleman said, "The place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you are missing from church, some part of God's house will be dark."

Your session has just adopted a new mission statement for St. Andrew's Church which you'll be hear more about in the coming weeks. It goes something like this:

**Inviting and welcoming all, we are
Called to celebrate God's love,
Gathered to grow as Christ's disciples,
Sent by the Spirit to serve.**

When you read that statement one thing that becomes clear is that we are not here just to hold services. We are not here just to run programs. We are not here just to meet in little groups that feel safe and comfortable. Salt doesn't exist for its own sake. It doesn't exist for itself.

St. Andrew's is a mission outpost that is "sent by the Spirit to serve." We are here to permeate a dying world in the way that salt permeates food.

By conservative estimate, more than a quarter of the population of the United States claim to have had a profound experience of faith in Jesus Christ. They consider themselves to be true believers, committed Christians. Jeffrey Iverson has made this interesting comparison: "A pound of meat would surely be affected by a quarter pound of salt. If this is real Christianity," he asks," then where's the effect on our society of which Jesus spoke?" How are we Christians making a positive difference in our world?

On Thursday evening St. Andrew's sponsored a community forum on economic justice. Well over half of the people who came were not from this church. We heard stories of people who were making a difference. One story was about a tomato picker in Florida who spent 12 hours a day on his hands and knees, filling buckets of tomatoes until he had picked two tons, so that at the end of the day he received \$50. That's all – no overtime pay, no health insurance, no sick leave, no paid holidays, no vacation, and no pension, just \$50. It wasn't enough to feed his family, so one day he decided to stop picking until he received one penny more for each pound he picked—one penny. Soon his co-workers joined him, and within a few months a national boycott of pickers, college students and many Christians began.

It was called the Taco Bell Boycott because that was the sole buyer of the tomatoes—a conglomerate that owns Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, and other restaurant chains. Then in March of this year, his ten-year boycott finally ended.

When I heard the story of this difference maker I was reminded of the story of Rosa Park whose body now lies in state in the Rotunda of our nation's capital. She changed the course of American history when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. She helped

our nation begin to overcome racism and segregation through what became known as the Civil Rights Movement. Aah, the power of salt when it is poured out; the power of a Difference Maker.

A couple of days ago somebody from the mayor's office called this church. They wanted to know if one of the pastors would be willing to represent the faith community by serving on a committee that is crafting a 30-year vision and strategic plan for the City of Portland. I was told they picked St. Andrew's because someone had told them this was a church that cared about its community. When I picked up the phone I happened to be putting some thoughts together for this message. And I couldn't help but chuckle at the tactics of my subversive, sneaky, salty God. So in response to the invitation I said, "Yes, one of our pastors will serve on this task force." And I did what any good husband would do: I volunteered my wife and co-pastor, Patty!

The idea of a 30-year vision prompted me to begin thinking about the things people who live in SW Portland seem to value. So I began to make a list of things our cultures subscribes to:

- Live in good health
- Have a long life
- Be slim and physically fit and toned
- Have great hair, makeup and body shape
- Be intelligent, articulate and computer-savvy
- Get into a good school and do well in school
- Be popular, sexually desirable without being promiscuous
- Pursue all our gifts and talents to the point of mastery
- Marry someone who has met all these criteria
- Be rich without being snotty, confident but not abrasive
- Communicate, have romance, share chores, have date nights
- Have a beautiful, clean, well-decorated, well-organized home
- Eat gourmet, low-fat or low-carb, high protein meals
- Have kids who are cute, healthy, smart, well-behaved, get into the right schools, escape all dangers of peer culture but still be well-liked and popular
- Create family traditions with holidays beautiful and meaningful
- Be activity in your kid's school and in the community
- Raise children in the faith and don't damage them psychologically
- Deep friendships, extended family relationships
- Write letters, remember birthdays and anniversaries
- Support aging parents, keep in touch with old friends
- Come to church regularly, be in a small group, teach Sunday school

he was also well-organized. You don't often find that combination in the same person.

1. Nehemiah seized the opportunity that God presented. Back in the days when blacksmiths were common, we used to hear people say, "Strike while the iron is hot." It meant that when the window of opportunity opens up you need to grab it or it will be lost. Nehemiah saw his opportunity and he took it. He got the ball rolling but he knew he couldn't do this work alone. So he immediately set out to involve others.

First, he appealed to the pride of the people of Jerusalem, "You can see the ruin around you" Actually the ruins had been there for almost one hundred years. Maybe they had gotten used to things the way they were so he said, in effect, "That is long enough. It is disgraceful that nothing has been done until now. Let's begin to act." Then he reminded the people, "God is with." When leadership steps out like that, it almost certainly finds a following. Nehemiah galvanized the people to action, to begin the process of rebuilding. He appealed to their sense of self-respect, and supplied an encouraging motive to begin. They responded positively to the vision. So in chapter two of Nehemiah we read that the people said, "Let's start rebuilding." (2:17-18 NIV). They weren't naïve. They knew the work before them was formidable. But somehow they began to feel hopeful about their future. All of Nehemiah's dreaming and planning and praying began to come together.

But listen to this: he may have provided the inspiration but without the people it would have been impossible to rebuild the wall. So in the next chapter we see evidence that: **2. Everyone got involved and worked together.** Chapter 3 is too long for us to read in detail but suffice it to say that as great a leader as Nehemiah was, he knew that if they were to rebuild the wall a collective, unified effort by the entire community would be needed. So he got the people involved. In verse one we learn that the high priest and his fellow priests began the work. That may encourage some who think that preachers never do any work except on Sundays! In the next verse we learn that some of the citizens from Jericho came over to help with the work.

In verse three you find out about the efforts of an entire family. In verse eight you even find a goldsmith and a perfume-maker working on the walls. There were people from all walks of life taking part. *Everyone got involved . . . and worked together.* All through this chapter you will find the phrase, "next to." So-and-so worked "next to" so-and-so. They helped one another. We learn from the New Testament that there are two things you cannot say any longer when you become a Christian. The first is, "You don't need me." Everyone in the body of Christ needs everyone else. The second thing is, "I

we can rebuild the wall, then we can rebuild the city. And if we can rebuild the city, then God can restore our community. And if God can restore our community, then we can fulfill our destiny. And if we can fulfill our destiny, then the world could be different.

So he prayed that God would give him the opportunity to help get this project off the ground. One day, he was pouring wine for the king. The king noticed Nehemiah wasn't quite his chipper self and said, "Why are you so sad? What's wrong?" Nehemiah replied, "O Great King, I thank God that you would ask that question. My countenance has fallen because my people in Jerusalem need to rebuild the walls of their city but they are too depressed and they don't have the resources, and I feel terrible for them. If your honor would permit me, I would like to take a leave of absence to go over to Jerusalem and help them rebuild the wall." The king said, "I will grant your request and what is more, I will give you some troops and horses and wood and bricks to do the job." Nehemiah said, "What a generous king you are. Thank you very much."

So he got on his donkey and he traveled far until he came to Jerusalem—or what was left of it. Because the second chapter tells us that his donkey had a hard time stepping through the city because the streets were in rubble. That was how bad it was. It was like portions of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit. The city was devastated. What is more, everyone was depressed and nobody knew how to go about rebuilding the city. So into that situation came Nehemiah on his donkey, riding into the town by the light of the silver moon.

Someone has said that vision is merely hope with a blueprint. Nehemiah made a careful assessment of the situation and developed a remarkable blueprint to rebuild the broken down walls. He stepped up to the plate as a leader and delivered for his people. But what I want you to notice is that this is not just a story of the rebuilding of some ancient city. Jerusalem is not only an historic city; it is also a symbolic city. What it pictures is the place where God wants to dwell. Jerusalem in ruins can be a picture of a devastated life in need of being restored; it can also be a picture of a faith community that needs renewal and transformation. The book of Nehemiah shows us the steps that are needed to live out this vision. It shows us how change can happen; how people of faith can rise above the despair of the past.

The steps Nehemiah took cover most of the dozen or so chapters in this book so obviously I'm going to have to give you just a brief summary of them. They are very specific steps; Nehemiah was not just a visionary leader;

- Be relaxed, friendly and easy-going.

Are you sensing where this is heading? This list is just crazy. We want it all, don't we? We can easily become enslaved by this high performance culture of ours. And the danger is—the temptation is—to become so enslaved and driven by this culture that we just try to add church stuff, service and ministry, on top of everything else. And guess what? There's no room!

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think Jesus would look at much of what we do and he would say: "God never intended people to live their lives in that kind of slavery. You're supposed to be the salt of the earth. I didn't create you to be captive to the culture." Salt should be a liberating word. Anytime that someone becomes so immersed in Jesus and his love and his calling they start to get free—free from the threats and rewards that keep people enslaved to the culture. And when people get free, they start to get salty. They learn to say "no" to certain things that don't fit into God's plan for them, and "yes" to the things that help to build the kingdom of God.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says. Those words are so powerful that they are often embroidered and framed and hung on walls. Yet notice in verse 13 that Jesus doesn't stop there; he goes on to say: "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."

Now why did Jesus have to go and say that? It all felt so good up to now. Did you ever see anybody embroider this last phrase and hang it up on a wall? I don't think so. This is the kind of thing that made people uncomfortable when they heard Jesus say it. He wasn't just into "feel-good" sermons where everyone always comes away feeling warm and fuzzy. Jesus was into making disciples. He was concerned about what the culture will try to do to you. It will try to seduce you to serve it rather than the kingdom of God. It will try to seduce you to spend your life being too busy, too driven, too preoccupied with whatever: career, money, status, kid's activities, hobbies and recreational pursuits.

And I'll tell you what my concern is in this. It will try to seduce you into making the church just another "stress-management" tool. On a bottle of aspirin, or on the side of Solarcaine, there used to be these words: "Fast, soothing, temporary relief from pain." Our culture will try to seduce you to bow down to it. Its number one goal is to keep you away from Jesus and his little community. If it can't succeed in that it will try to turn your church-going into just a "fast, soothing, temporary relief from pain." But it won't really change anything. After the service is over, you leave still enslaved to

all the things that everybody else in this crazy culture is still enslaved to. And Jesus says, *This is not my plan for you. You are the salt of the earth.*

Let me say it again: We do not come here just to put on services or to run programs, although those can be very important and very helpful. We are here to become disciples. We are here to fulfill Jesus' commission: ***You are the salt of the earth.*** You are it. I am it. God's plan to fight the decay and corruption of this sorry, dark world to make it winsome and attractive—is through us. It's through this little community of believers known as St. Andrew's Church. Jesus is looking for people who will say, "I will die to the culture. I will not live in slavery to its values and spend my time and energy and money pursuing it and then use my church as a temporary stress-management pain reliever. I will live as the salt of the earth. I am sent by the Spirit to serve so I will allow you, Lord, to flow through me and work in me. I will allow the saltiness of the Gospel to permeate my home, my work, my neighborhood, my school, my community, so that I, too, can be a Difference Maker." Do you have any idea what would happen if you and I were to take our saltiness seriously?

Somewhere there is a children's story about a little witch who got lost and wandered around a deserted city at night. Everywhere she set her foot, a carpet of flowers appeared. This is the calling of Christ to his disciples today – to bring out the God-flavors and the God-colors in this often flavorless, colorless world. People should be able to spot where the Christians have been because of the trail of color, the taste of salt, and the trail of light they leave behind. So, here's what we're going to do. My job and your job for the week ahead is to take hold of this little packet of salt and put it some place where we're going to see it, and when we do, we're going to take a long look at it and say to ourselves, "I'm the salt of the earth." With all of my flaws, that's who God has called me to be, that's what I am. Then sometime this week, break it open and pour all of it out! All of it out! And become a Difference Maker.

Let's pray... Like salt poured out of the shaker, O God, pour my life out. Wherever you want me to go, I'll go. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. Amen.

A Difference Making Church

(Nehemiah 2:17-20, 3:1-5a, 6:15-16, 12:27, 43; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

Today we are going to look at one of the greatest visionary leaders in the Bible – a man by the name of Nehemiah. For a long time the only thing I knew about Nehemiah was that he was supposed to be the shortest man in the Bible. "Knee-high-miah" they called him back in my Sunday School days. I'm glad that since then I've discovered a great deal more about him as I trust you have too. He's not as well known as an Abraham or Moses, a Peter or Paul, but he was a difference maker nonetheless.

Nehemiah came on the scene in Persia in the 5th century BC in the Old Testament book that bears his name. Here's the setting: Israel had been defeated over a century earlier and they had been scattered around the ancient world. What was so devastating to them was not just the defeat of their army or the loss of their land; it was their dream of building a community through whom God would bless all the nations of the world. That was the loss.

In Nehemiah's day, some Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem. People started to get their hopes up. Maybe this would be the rebirth of their dream. But Nehemiah heard from his brother that the city was in total ruins. The wall that once protected it had been broken down, the people were vulnerable to attack, living in great fear.

So God gives Nehemiah a vision to undertake an extraordinary task – rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. What I especially like about this story is that he was not a priest, or a religious leader, or a teacher, or a prophet. He was, of all things, a wine steward.

During my college years I spent part of a summer serving as a wine steward. Some members of my choir had auditioned for an unusual job at the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont. We were to be a team of singing waiters. We got the job, drove out to Vermont, and took turns serving meals in the dining room and entertaining guests in the main lodge. Well, one day the regular wine steward was fired and I was drafted to take his place. So Johannes von Trapp, the lodge manager and youngest son of Maria, took me down into the wine cellar and gave me a crash course in wine-tasting. To be honest, I didn't know a glass of cabernet from a glass of grape juice, so I didn't last long in the job. But it was fun while it lasted!

But getting back to Nehemiah, he must have really known his wines, because he had the respect of King Artaxerxes. He was the king's cup bearer or wine steward. After he'd heard about the condition of Jerusalem, he couldn't eat or sleep. So he began to think: What if we rebuild the wall? If