

“What Matters Most for Deacons and the Rest of Us”

Isaiah 58:1–12; Matthew 5:13–16

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Churches have had different understandings of the role of deacon over the years, as well as who qualifies for the role. Some churches still do not allow women to serve as deacons while women have served here since the nineteenth century. It is not a new act of enlightenment. In Romans 16:1 Phoebe is referred to as a deacon. In many ways, we are still catching up to the early church. We should also note that some churches do not allow divorced people to serve in this way because 1 Timothy 3:12 says deacons should be the husband of one wife...

Sometimes we take for granted the openness of this church, but beyond the matter of who qualifies for the role, the primary debate in my forty-four years of ministry has been whether deacons are servant leaders after the example of Christ who care for orphans and widows, those who are vulnerable and in need, as in scripture, or administrative leaders like a board of directors, as in corporate America. The church needs administrative leadership, but it's hard to make a case for deacons in this role, if scripture has any influence on our practice. Ministers do not use the term “board of deacons,” though I have seen some deacons who looked bored, present company excluded, of course...

Yet all kidding aside, before deacons do anything, what matters most is who deacons are. This is true for all of us in the church, but it is especially true for deacons as leaders, alongside ministers. Who we are and how we live every day either enhances our witness or destroys it completely. We're not talking about perfection. Grace lies at the heart of everything we do, but a deep commitment to following Jesus in everyday life, including church life, is essential to everything else.

I want to consider briefly what this involves in light of two seemingly-unrelated texts which are, in fact, connected — the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount about salt and light and the words of the prophet Isaiah about the fast God chooses.

Jesus talks about being salt and light. They are familiar images— we have heard many sermons on them— but as New Testament professor Warren Carter notes, understanding what Jesus is saying begins with the realization that Christian faith is about more than self-interest. It’s about what we have to offer the world. For the early church, it is a witness against the Roman Empire and its values, and for the values of God.

“Communities of Jesus-followers do not exist for themselves,” Carter says, “No matter how powerless, they are not to live in retreat from or avoidance of the imperial world. Rather, their mission is to manifest God’s empire that contests the status quo and envisions an alternative societal experience (*workingpreacher.org*).”

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says we are the salt of the earth. Salt seasons, preserves, and transforms. Too much of it can taste bad and lead to cardiovascular trouble, but Jesus is not thinking of salt in this way. He is talking about the way salt makes food better but only if it retains its saltiness. We are called to make the world better, but we can do that only if we retain our distinctiveness.

In like manner, Jesus says, we are the light of the world, those who can enable others to see their path and not trip, like me in the middle of the night over the door of the puppy’s crate; those capable of bringing hope into desperate circumstances. As Israel was called to be a light to the nations, as Jesus brings light the darkness cannot overcome, we are called to be the light of the world. But we can’t do this if we hide our light. We are different, but we have to share our difference with others.

So, what is different about us? The wife of a pastor I worked with said Christians are the people who will let you out in traffic. If only that were so... though the fact that it isn’t necessarily is an indictment of sorts. We are called to unusual acts of kindness and civility. In a time when people seem hell-bent on being as cruel as possible, even more so online, which is why I have closed my Facebook account, we are called to be kind and gentle in all our interactions with others.

This week Baptist News Global posted an article by Brett Younger entitled “Why You Gotta Be So Mean?” It includes pointed examples of hostility, including a co-worker asking a woman with a Downs Syndrome child who was pregnant again if she was having prenatal testing done so that

she could “get rid of it if it turns out like the first one.” Brett includes other examples, but we encounter this reality every day. We are called to offer something different to world. It may seem like a low bar, but it is not. One way we can be salt and light, one way deacons can flavor and transform the work, is simply by being kind.

Another way we can be salt and light is by extending compassion and concern to the poor and vulnerable. If it feels like preachers get stuck on this note, it’s because Jesus gets stuck on it, like the prophets before him, like the editors of the Torah, and like many of the authors of New Testament epistles. Over and over again Jesus spends time with outcasts, he tells story after story about the rich and the poor, and in the parable of the sheep and goats, he says we will be judged in eternity on the basis of how we treat the poor and needy, the stranger and prisoner.

There are many opportunities in the life of this church to live out this part of our faith. We can volunteer in the Clothing Ministry or with White Flag, work with Toy Joy or the food truck, package food with Rise Against Hunger or work with the Welcome House Ministry of CBF to help immigrants in our community. We are surrounded by human need. We worship at the heart of one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. Years ago, long before my seventeen years here, we decided to remain here and commit ourselves to serving this community. There is no more faithful way to be a deacon or follower of the Christ who gave his life and death for all in need.

We can also be salt and light by living humble lives and practicing forgiveness, by caring more about spiritual things than wealth and status, by taking seriously the way of the cross. In all these ways, we offer something different to the world. In fact, in all these ways, we offer something different than many churches exhibit.

Kindness, compassion for the poor and vulnerable, humility, forgiveness, valuing spiritual things over wealth — all these things stand in stark contrast to the mean, callous, arrogant, unforgiving, and materialistic spirit emanating from many leaders, even church leaders. We used to talk about a red-letter Bible, the words in red being attributed to Jesus. The church could use more red-letter lives right now, more people who claim Jesus’ name seeking to follow him more faithfully.

But the reality that the church is part of the problem today is not a new phenomenon for the covenant community. Consider our reading from Isaiah. God tells the prophet to shout out the words of judgment he is given. He is not to soft-pedal the message like many contemporary preachers seeking to preserve a superficial peace. Lift up your voice like a trumpet, says God, and tell them in no uncertain terms about their sin!

The message is not for outsiders to the faith, a secular culture, or national enemies. It is for Israelites who are gathering for worship, or to be more precise, the ruling elite among them, those who take time to rest and worship on the Sabbath, Isaiah says, while oppressing their workers. After having been oppressed in exile, those who are doing well back in the land immediately use their newfound privilege to oppress the poor and vulnerable, just to make a little more. So, Isaiah says, God does not accept their worship, God does not hear their prayers.

It's not that there is something wrong with their words or music, liturgy and rituals. It's the way they are living that is the problem, the true test of faith. The fast God chooses is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into their house. If they do this and then call on God, God will say, "Here I am."

It's difficult to read these words and not hear a word of indictment of this moment in our national life, especially of religious voices trying to attach God's blessing to injustice. Cutting off aid to the poor and using the funds to oppress the most vulnerable... What would Isaiah say? What would Jesus say? Neither would soft-pedal the message.

The good news is that there is more than judgment here. There is a path forward. The prophet says — confront injustice, help the poor, as this church does in many ways; speak out against violence, as our deacons have done this week. Some may quarrel with the choice of some words, hopefully not those taken from the Bible, but the spirit of the statement expresses who deacons are, salt and light for the world, agents of change, Christlike change. This is who we are all called to be.

Don't lose your distinctiveness, Jesus says, don't hide your light, be the difference the world needs, shine your light before others who may see your good works and give glory to God! May we listen to him.