

To get started today, I want to show you something. I love to cook and today I am going to show you how to make one of my favorite soups.

How many of you like soup? What are your favorite kinds of soup?

Today, I am going to make Cheeseburger Soup/Chili/Taco soup.

I like to make it in the crock-pot at the beginning of a day, so the smells of the soup fill the house by the time I get home. When I get home at the end of the work day and the smells are all throughout the house, because the soup has been simmering, I am taken back to my childhood, when my mom used to have dinner all prepared for us. That is a smell that reminds me of being loved in a family.

I have done a few things ahead of time for this. (Mix the ingredients I have prepared, together, explaining what I do as I go along).

This is the time of year I love to make soup. I love to make soup, because it tastes so good. Each ingredient, adds to the flavor. Each ingredient brings something important to the broth. Each ingredient matters.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus says, "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. . . Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept."

What Jesus is telling us, is that we matter. Each one of us matters. Each one of us is important to God's Kingdom. Each one of us brings gifts to share with the church and with the world. And if

we are going to be faithful to God, we need to find a way to let the God given spices of who we are and the God given light within us to show forth to a world in need.

Last week, we started a sermon series called *Finding a Place to Belong*. This series is all about finding our place as a part of the family of God. It is all about helping us to discover what it is that we can do to live our faith, share our faith, take our place in the larger family of faith. We have talked already about *Checking the Commitments* that are most important to us, last week. We even have given people a chance to renew your commitment to faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

Today, we are going to talk more about claiming the gift of who we are, we are talking about living the covenant we made last week, through seeing ourselves as important to the greater mission and ministry of God.

One of the hurdles we have to move beyond is coming to see and believe that we really do make a difference. We really do matter.

Each of us is gifted in wondrous and unique ways. Like the different ingredients in the soup pot, we add a special flavor to the world, just because of who we are. We have been shaped by our families and by our experiences. We have been shaped by where we were born and by when we were born. I believe God can use those shaping influences to help the church make an impact in the world.

What has shaped you from your growing up? Was your family open to all kinds of people? Did your family provide a safe, loving, supportive environment? Did your parents divorce? Have you survived difficult times? What did that teach you? How did that influence you? How does that help you connect with God?

All of these types of influences that shape us, are what God can use to make a difference in mission and ministry. Our Java Notes is but one example of how the passion of a few people can make a huge difference in mission and ministry.

A second hurdle we have to face is realizing that there are people who we influence, people who are watching us. Many of you know that this past week our family was back in Fargo. This candle that I am lighting has my daughter Whitney's name on it. I light it to remember the life of one who has touched me in a deep and profound way, by the love we shared. I was in Fargo to testify at a hearing on the death of my daughter, Whitney about my son, Isaac's, involvement in her death.

We flew to Fargo. When we got off the plane and walked into the airport, we saw my granddaughter, Brooke. She was on the other side of a window, in a restaurant, just waiting for us. When she saw us get off the plane, she just jumped up and down with excitement and joy, yelling, "Papa, Yaya. Papa, Yaya."

When we got into the main part of the terminal, she came running up to us to greet us and give us a huge hug. Then she wanted to hang with us.

Later in the day, I looked at Debbie and said, "Isn't it great to be loved so much?" She just smiled and said, "Yes."

Brooke is one of the people we get to influence in our life. It is a wonderful opportunity. Seeing her love for us is humbling. Seeing how much she looks up to us and the sheer delight she has in being with us, reminds me of many people who have influenced me.

Who is it that has influenced you? Who is it that you get to influence? And how will you choose to influence them?

You and I are called to live our faith. Jesus says, "*Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others you will prompt people to open up with God. . .*" How we live really matters. It shows what is important to us.

Are you willing to be salt? Are you willing to be light? Are you willing to be generous with your life and to others, so that you can help them connect with God?