

HOMILY 5TH Sunday Ordinary Time
February 8, 2026

There was a woman who was single and getting a little older and wanted to be married, so she was looking for a husband. One day, she was sitting on a bench at a park that she went to frequently when a man came along and sat in the same area. She struck up a conversation with him. In the course of their conversation, she said “I have never seen you here before, did you just move into the neighborhood?” He said “Yes, I just got out of prison.” She asked “What were you in prison for?” He said “for murdering my wife.” She responded “Oh, so you’re single.” I don’t know if she was really listening to what he was saying or if she was just listening to the parts she wanted to hear.

In the Gospel reading today we are called to be salt and light to the world. Salt is not much good by itself. If you were hungry, your hunger would not be satisfied by eating salt. But when salt is added to food, it can enhance its flavor. It can act as a preservative as it does in canning. When mixed with ice and snow it can melt them on the pavement so that it becomes safer to drive. Salt can also have some negative effects. If you have High Blood Pressure and eat too much salt, it may raise your blood pressure. The same is true of light. Light is not much good by itself. It is only good if it is illuminating something else. It can illuminate things that we need to see. It can also have some negative effects. Light can illuminate things that we are not meant to see, things that should remain private. The gospel tells us that we cannot just be virtuous ourselves. We need to mix with others around us, to have personal contact with others to help them and bring out the goodness in others. In the first reading, we hear that we are called to help the poor and helpless to provide for them physically, but we also need to help others spiritually.

We have an epidemic of anxiety, depression and loneliness in our country today, and I think this is related to our increasing level of isolation. Studies show that all types of personal interactions make us happier. In all of the personal contacts that we have every day we should be open to really being present to one another. This includes the potential encounters with all of the people we come in contact with. I was reading that the Ritz-Carlton Hotels have a 10/5 policy. Their employees are to make eye contact and smile when the customer is 10 feet away and greet them when they are 5 feet away. This makes people feel more welcome. I

thought that this seemed pretty contrived, but I tried it. If you make eye contact and smile, you are way more likely to have an interaction with the person whether you know them or not.

Let's get back to the story I told you earlier. It is just kind of a funny story, but we can learn from it. First of all, the woman opened up a conversation with someone she did not know. In that situation wouldn't we be way more likely to be looking at our phone, totally unaware of the presence of another human being. And if this man is in a new place just getting out of prison, he may just need to talk to someone. So it was a good start, but was she really listening to him and open to him or was she just interviewing a potential husband. Just listening to someone and really hearing and understanding what they are saying is frequently what they need and what we are called to do. Sometimes we have a personal agenda in talking to someone, and sometimes we are only half listening to someone but really just formulating what you are about to say to them. If you are really listening to someone, when you do talk you should respond in a way that they know you have heard them and understand what they are saying. When the man said that he was in a new place just getting out of prison, asking why he was in prison is probably not a good response. That is just satisfying her own curiosity. A better response could be "it must be hard to adjust to being in a new place." Maybe he just needs someone to talk to that will really hear him, and maybe that is what God is calling the woman to do. Sometimes it is easier to talk to someone you do not know well about personal issues. It may feel safe.

I think good listening skills are highly underrated, not just with people we do not know well, but also with people we know. Sometimes we have an emotional reaction to something someone said, we put them in a particular group or tribe, and think that we know what they think on a whole range of things. You could be completely wrong and the conversation is not going to be productive. And maybe you want to talk to someone about a particular issue and have a whole speech planned. Giving a prepared speech is probably not going to be productive. In all of our interactions, it is best to really listen and stay part of the conversation.

Like salt and light we are only doing good when we mix with others. Be open to all of the personal contacts you have every day. Wonder if God has brought you together for a reason. And then listen and go with the conversation. See what unfolds.