

Today's gospel can be easy to misunderstand.

We hear the words of God – the words of Jesus- and we tend to hear them as rules or marching orders. And since that tends to be our default position – we hear Jesus preaching to his followers and we think he is saying that they'd better be salt and light. Or maybe Jesus is telling us how to become salt and light. Or here's what you need to do if you are going to continue to be salt and light. But I don't think that's what's going on here at all.

Jesus isn't giving instructions or orders. Instead he is making a declaration. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. And because that's true, Jesus says, we won't be able to help but do the things that salt and light do – preserve, add flavor, illumine, guide.

In other words, God designed us to help each other and care for the world. It's right there in the creation story in Genesis. And since that's how God created us, we can't help but be who God has made us to be. Does that sound believable? Do you buy it? You are the way you are, and that the way God made you. You are salt and you are light.

But not always.

After all, every day, there is plenty of evidence in the world that human beings just aren't living up to what Jesus declared. If we're honest, we don't have to look any further than our own lives to see that some days God's children fall short. Some days we hide our light, or we resist being too salty. We hold it in. We don't say the things that we might say, and we end up wondering how Jesus' promise, that we will shine bright can ever be true, because we know that lights can be hidden.

We know that we can fail to be all that Jesus has declared us to be.

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So how do we make certain that there is oil in our lamps and zest in our seasoning? There's probably more than one answer to the question, but for me, the best answer is to be surrounded by a community of believers. Come to church! Go to worship!

When we gather for worship there's a reason the confession of sin comes so early in the service. It helps us get our cards on the table and we say "Here I am, God. You said that I am salt and light. Here's what I did with it." We get the chance to speak the truth that we've fallen short of what God hopes we will be. And then, immediately, we receive God's forgiveness and grace before being sent out again to be salt and light for the world once again.

You see, being salt and light isn't something we do - it's something we are. We are the city on the hill and every time we come to worship, we are reminded that regardless of our success and failures, our good deeds or bad, whatever we've done or has been done to us- our true identity as God's beloved children, has not changed. Not one whit. You are God's beloved child. Nothing can change that.

Jesus said, “You and me, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are those loved by God in order to love the people around us. We just can’t help it. It’s how we were made. And a city built on the top of a hill can’t be hidden.

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On Thursday morning before I came to work, I was watching the news. There was a conversation going on about the previous day’s vote in the senate. And as a part of the report they played the beginning of Senator Mitt Romney’s speech that he made on Wednesday.

Now, whether you like Romney or not - whether you agree with his politics or his theology- I think that his actions are worthy of our attention. Because when you build a city on a hill - you can’t hide it. And when you preface your actions by publicly acknowledging that you are guided by your faith in God – you can’t hide that either.

On the floor of the senate, Romney said, “I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am. And then further on he noted that his actions were certain to draw negative consequences on any number of fronts, but he said, “Does anyone seriously believe that I would consent to these consequences other than from an inescapable conviction that my oath before God demanded it of me?”

In other words, whether you agree with his vote or not, he was doing his best to not put a basket over his light.

One of the news commentators said that he believed it is likely that this will be the story most often told about Romney in the years to come. Not that he was the governor of Massachusetts, not that he was a Senator from Utah, not even that he was a candidate for the presidency, but that he will be remembered for making a difficult choice in direct conflict with his constituents, his colleagues and his party, and he did it all on account of his faith. He was willing to be a city on a hill, knowing that there would be people who would disapprove.

Most Christians don’t have to face a crowd of reporters with microphones and camera men when they are trying to be that city. There’s usually not that much attention that we are given. When we are trying to add a little saltiness to life, there isn’t a whole crowd there asking for your next comment about what you’re going to do. And yet, that doesn’t mean that our actions are any easier or any less significant. We are the light. We are the salt and whether we see it or not, we are the city on the hill. Each of us is charged with letting our light shine so that others can see the goodness of our God.

To confuse all of this a bit, however, are the verses in the second half of today’s gospel. What is the role of the law and the commandments when it comes to shining bright with the light of God?

If Jesus has in fact declared that we are salt and light rather than becoming those things- if he is proclaiming who we are rather than telling us how to become those things- what do we do with all that talk about righteousness and rules. What is the role of the law in the kingdom of God?

In an essay on this passage from Matthew, preacher David Lose proposes that maybe the “law was never intended to serve as the means by which we enter the kingdom [of God.]” If that’s true, then what is the law for?

Well, he says, maybe the law provides us with an outline of what kingdom life looks like. Maybe it’s not the entrance exam to get into the kingdom but instead maybe it is a map for life when you are already there. You’re already in.

So maybe, then, Jesus came to fulfill the law precisely in the sense that he reorients us to its true nature – guiding us to live as members of the kingdom rather than enabling us to become them. So, then what do we do with the final verse about “the righteousness of the Pharisees” that Jesus talks about?

Maybe Jesus is saying that if you’re determined to use the law as a requirement rather than a gift, then you’d better be prepared to keep it perfectly. Maybe Jesus’ words aren’t a threat, but a warning – if you’re going to play by the rules of the law then you are going to lose by the rules of the law. You can’t keep it right all the time.

Maybe Jesus is saying once again – that our entrance into the kingdom of God comes only by grace, because we are God’s beloved and forgiven children. And the law is supposed to be a gift that helps us live into our identity as God’s children. It guides us to be brighter, to be saltier and more willing to be the city on the hill.

Our first reading today says, what does God require of us, but to do justice, to live with kindness, to walk humbly with our God. The law is a guide for us. You are already a member of the kingdom of God and these things help us to live our lives more faithfully.

If all of that is true, and I think that it is, we’re right back to the very start. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are the city on the hill. And you are going to have choices, all through your life, of how it is that you will be those things- how you will act it out- how you will shine bright.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

When those times come to be the city on the hill, try not to cover it up. Try not to disguise who you are or to say what you have to say quietly but be bold. Be brave because you are a beloved child of God and nothing can change that.