

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; 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 under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus was Jewish. His Jewish parents raised him in a Jewish home. He studied Torah in Jewish synagogues and celebrated Jewish holy days. Jesus argued with other Jews about how to be devout, which was and still is, of course, a rabbinic way to enlarge the wisdom of Torah.

Jesus lived like a Jew, learned and taught like a Jew, and he died thinking he was reforming Judaism. “I have come not to abolish the law or the prophets,” Jesus said, “but to fulfill.” The word we hear translated as “fulfill” is more accurately rendered as something like “readjusted.”

In short, Jesus, the man who put the “Christ” in the word “Christian,” still speaks to us from the center of his Jewish religion, not from the religion that developed around his life and teaching.

Two weeks ago, several of us stood on the hilltop overlooking the Galilee where Matthew’s Jesus gave this particular teaching. Maybe that’s what focused my awareness on the need to remember, always, that the founder of Christianity was so thoroughly Jewish.

Christians can too easily talk about Jewish law as though it were a burden rather than being curious about God’s teaching given to the children of Israel as a gift. If we overlook the Jewish context of the early days of our own faith, we can easily forget that Jesus never argued that Christianity was superior to Judaism. Our thinking gets a little sloppy when we contemplate the passion and death of Jesus at the hands of

the Roman Empire and a handful of Jewish religious authorities collaborating with them.

The resulting inaccurate speculations and stereotypes bolster outright and open anti-Judaism. And yet, the more subtle and invasive problem is that those distortions lead to *unintentional* anti-Judaism.

This morning, we need to be reminded that Jesus was Jewish because that's the only way we can really learn from what Matthew's Jesus says in the Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus tells the gathered crowds and his Jewish disciples. "You are the light of the world."

What comes to mind for most of us when we hear that phrase, "the salt of the earth," are genuine, reliable, morally solid folks. We think of straightforward, generous, regular Joes. And that may describe some of the people Jesus is talking to.

Among his disciples, Andrew was a former follower of John the Baptizer, who centuries later became the patron saint of Scotland. I'm willing to grant that he may have been a regular guy.

Then there's his brother, Simon Peter – a Zealot interested in overthrowing the Roman Empire who would later deny Jesus three times in his hour of need. James and John bar-Zebedee, the Sons of Thunder, were there, probably looking to get into a good fight. It's also possible that Matthew, the tax collector, was there. Or maybe he was still busy extracting money from his neighbors for the Roman Empire. Maybe Judas was there.

None of those guys were exactly "salt of the earth" in the sense that we often think of it.

And yet, these are the people, along with the crowd following them, to whom Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." This is not a prediction or a promise that his followers would *become* salt and light. He could have said, "If you want to be salt and light, do this...." Or, "If you do these things, someday I will call you salt and light." Instead, Jesus just declared it straight out – you *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.

The people that Jesus commended this way were all kinds of folks, with all kinds of temperaments and backgrounds: Most were one kind of Jew or another, some were followers of John and others

disagreed with Jesus and with each other. Seems likely that some Gentiles were also there.

To this point, the apostles had done nothing to really distinguish themselves and none of them had done anything to earn a title. Even so, to these people Jesus said, “You are, *right now*, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In our 21st c. Christian ears, what Jesus says is charming. But something is lost. We translate two different words from Matthew’s Greek manuscript. One word, “Kosmos,” we hear as “world,” as in “the light of the world.” The other we translate as “earth,” as in “the salt of the earth,” but only because that is as close as English can get.

Jesus is referring to something that would have been obvious to his Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking listeners. You can still see what he is talking about today as you travel between Jerusalem and Jericho through the Jordan Valley. Along the roads through some of the less settled areas, you notice mounds beside encampments or houses.

They are clay-ovens called “taboons” that are fueled by dried donkey, goat and camel dung. People here and around the Middle East use these ovens to bake bread as they have done since ancient days. In the Aramaic and Hebrew languages that Jesus spoke, the word that names this kind of bread-baking clay-oven is exactly the same word for “earth.”

During Jesus’ lifetime, each village had a common clay-oven, and each oven had a slab of salt at the bottom. People piled dried dung mixed with salt on top of the slab because salt has properties that help the dung to burn. Over extended use, the salt slabs lose their ability to catalyze. They become useless and need to be replaced.

Jesus’ reference to salt has nothing to do with flavor and everything to do with essence—specifically, with salt’s natural ability to help maintain life-sustaining fire. You can hear now, what Jesus means: “You are the what makes the life-giving oven work.”

And if that isn’t enough, Jesus reminds us again just how Jewish he is. “You are the light of the Kosmos,” he says. To people who are familiar with Torah, even in passing, the phrase is a traditionally Jewish comment. Rabbis still teach that light is a metaphor for Torah and for acting on those teachings, as well as an image of the human soul.

In Hebrew scripture, the prophet Isaiah says that God gave Israel as a light to the nations. In our reading this morning, Isaiah implores the people to follow the teaching of Torah so that the light of Israel “shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly...” and “then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

Matthew’s Jesus does not say “I am the light” as John’s Jesus does. Instead, he says to a group of people who have so far done very little to earn praise: “*You* are the light of the Kosmos.”

“Let your light shine before others,” Jesus implores his followers. “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Now, while his insistence on “good works” may not have made Jesus a good Protestant, there should be no lingering doubt that he was wise and joyfully Jewish teacher. Right relationship and right action are good. In fact, right *action* is more important than right belief!

God is the source of the flaming spiritual fire that radiates through us; it is not our own light or even a light for our own benefit. Even so, while we differ from each other in many ways, we can each consent to let God’s one light illuminate some part of the Kosmos through whatever unique vessel each one of us is right now.

We don’t act on God’s teachings to earn points toward a golden ticket to heaven. We act in recognition that God created us to be like earth-ovens or candles before God. We are vessels where the shining light of God’s presence can dwell for others. Like our Jewish ancestors in the faith, we act to participate in God’s outpouring into the Kosmos.

God has already named us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Why not act like what we truly are?

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