

Jesus says to all who will listen, this congregation included: “You are the salt of the earth. And you are the light of the world. And since you are salt, you ought to be salty. And since you are light, you ought to be bright.”

What does Jesus mean by this? I believe it’s a statement of calling. Quite simply, it’s really hard to live into our purpose – that is to be what we have been created to be – if we choose to abandon and avoid the very qualities that espouse our being. And indeed, the very qualities we were created to espouse!

Admittedly, I’m a lower-sodium guy. I don’t cook with a lot of salt, and I rarely add it to my finished entrée. But I do acknowledge that salt has a purpose. It’s an enhancer. You sprinkle a little here or there, and it reveals the umph, or the flavor burst, in what it’s added to. Wow, slice of watermelon, I never knew you could taste like this.

But what good is salt, for any of us, if it always stays in the table shaker or sealed up in the pantry. It’s got no value if it’s never used.

I think, too, about rock salt. We dump it in our homemade ice-cream makers – it helps the ingredients to slowly freeze. And when it snows, we often use salt to help prevent icy sidewalks. Portions of the salt live out their purpose – some of the granules show themselves, and they work hard. You might say some of the salt separates itself from the batch. And some doesn’t – when the making or the melting is done, all that’s left over are a bunch of water-logged pebbles. Salt without saltiness.

Can salt ever really be salt if it never leaves the container or it never expresses its saltiness?

There are all sorts of lights in this world. Jesus is right. Light doesn't have a whole lot of usefulness if it's hidden. But be careful not to make every kind of demonstrative light a purposeful one.

Salt draws out flavor. Purposeful light draws out life and warmth. Yes, we can see high-beams or brights on the cars in our rear-view mirrors of the opposing lanes of traffic. Yes, we can see stadium lights and those illumining various commercial signs that disrupt once restful neighborhood scenes. And, yes, Daddy, we can see the abrupt and immediate bright light of drawn shades in our bedroom when you need us to wake up for school in a hurry! There's nothing hidden about any of these lights! But Jesus isn't talking about intrusive lights, those that shout and demand to be seen.

Instead, Jesus is talking about light that draws others in. The earth orbits the sun. That means the sun stands still, consistent, proud, bright. "I am here," she says. And each day, she waits for us to turn toward her. And each season, she waits for us to turn a little closer to her warmer side. She draws us in.

Porch lights, and candles in the window, even that old Texaco star that welcomed anxious travelers with empty gas tanks, all have a similar quality. The guiding light, the welcoming light, the homecoming light is sturdy and resolute. It's got no time for scattering; it's all about gathering.

Light cannot be light if it is hidden away. And light can only be light when it's shared with others.

Jesus says we are salt and light. That means Jesus says we are all, each one of us, a gift to this world.

My daughter Mary Allen has a new favorite saying. When she sees something she really likes, she says, “Oh yeah, baby!” I think Jesus surveys the crowd, remember it’s the Sermon on the Mount, and he looks out over them, and by extension, us as well, and he says, “Oh yeah, baby!”

Each and everyone of us are a gift. But we can only be gifts to this world if we choose to be gifts that are given, and shared, and experienced in this world. Be salt that is salty. Be light that is bright.

The second part of our text offers instruction on how we might live out or express our giftedness.

Torah is the law. Last week, in Micah, the prophet offered a ten-thousand foot view: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Jesus often reminds us: love God and love neighbor as you love yourself.

Torah exists as a guardrail or a hedge. It’s meant to help every person be intentional in avoiding the destructive tendencies that lead to woundedness. It’s meant to foster an ever-maturing mutuality among God, neighbor, and land.

But we struggle with the clinical nature of all the details attached to Torah – we get tripped up on the operating manual. Extremes and polarities begin to develop.

On one end is a rigid fundamentalism. The maintenance of the guardrail becomes more important than the wellbeing of the community it's trying to protect. For example, healing on Sabbath becomes troublesome. Yes, you've helped your neighbor, but you've done so in defiance of tradition and law.

On the other extreme is a marginalization of laws and behaviors. God is ultimately oriented to a radical grace and hospitality. Therefore, we're not ultimately accountable or responsible for our own destructive actions. For example, because Jesus maintains a sense of community with people who participate in destructive behaviors, Jesus also condones and even endorses destructive behaviors. Therefore, Torah has no sense of gravity or bearing for our everyday lives.

Jesus meets the tension head on. He does not advocate for an exacting standard that privileges the few and marginalizes the masses. It's not about righteousness as a tool for self-promotion. Jesus also refuses to dismiss the law, not even a letter. Yes, humans do destructive things, and yes, God parents us, even the most destructive people. But that doesn't mean our purpose is destruction. Jesus, through the application of Torah, wants us to become aware of the destructive things we do to one another, and model, intentionally, lives of empathy and compassion that will eventually remove the individual and corporate woundedness we experience.

So...if we want to be a salty Sardis, that means we must focus our efforts on enhancing – that is making seen, heard, and known the love of God to all those with whom we come into contact. And taking delight and interest when God's umph is manifested in our neighbors.

And if we want to be a bright Sardis, that means we've got to be a people who are sturdy and consistent with our love. We've got to be a community that draws others closer.

And if want to be a Sardis that lives out Torah with authenticity, we cannot lose our saltiness and our light. Torah isn't ours to store in the cupboard, or place on an ivory tower, its knowledge something to hoard from others. And our living, influenced by Torah, and undergirded in God's spirit isn't something to be hidden from the world. Our purposeful lives have the purpose of being shared with others in order that their purposeful lives might also inspire purpose for the neighbors they encounter. Was that enough purposes?

Taste and be tasted, Sardis as God has purposed you to taste and be tasted. See and be seen, Sardis, as God has purposed you to see and be seen. Live, Sardis, with love, and with justice, and with humility, as God has created you to live.

And just in case you didn't know – there's always a salt shaker on the table here; Tom Bodett doesn't live here, and we're not a Motel 6, but we too, always leave a light on; And the canon, the formal one we read each week, is always open, not to mention the extended one we read, too. That second canon, those other materials – stories, songs, voices of dissent, etc.– that help inform our faith, ensure our hearts and minds remain open for new ways of being God's people and living God's good purposes.

May it always be so!

Amen.