

All, Not I – Matthew 5:13-20

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This week, I'm going to do something I don't usually do. I'm going to invite you, if you feel comfortable, to open your pew Bibles. I know, I know...it's very un-Presbyterian to open your Bibles during worship. And you certainly don't need to do this to find meaning in this moment. But, I'm going to point out a couple things that might resonate more if the text was in front of you.

You can turn to Matthew 5:13-20. It's on page 4 in the New Testament section, of course.

This is another early bit of teaching that Jesus does as part of his sermon on the mount, right after his lesson on the Beatitudes that we treated last Sunday. In these verses, Jesus uses some very familiar words to us: salt and light. Many a sermon have been preached on what it means to be "salt" and "light" in the world. They are tangible elements we all know and metaphorical gold to preachers tasked with making scripture come alive to her or his congregation.

I want to call your attention, though, to the first words in both verses 13 and 14. It's the same word in both cases: you.

"Unlike so many other languages, including the Greek in which this text is written, English is impoverished for its lack of differentiation between the singular and second person plural "you."

As Melanie Howard, a professor of Biblical studies at Fresno State says, "It is important to note that [these verses are] addressed to a plural audience (or, in colloquial terms, "y'all"). That is, no one individual embodies salt or light. Rather, the full community is needed to exemplify that which most resembles the salt and light of which Jesus speaks."

So, often when we see the word "you," we think somebody is speaking of an individual. And it's certainly true about our faith. "You (Jim, Lisa, Karen, or Kathy)" need to be the salt of the earth. "You (Jack, Becky, Joey, or Carolyn)" need to be the light of the world.

But here, the context is the community: you, plural. Jesus is speaking to the gathered masses during this sermon that has drawn great interest. People are gathering on rumors of this new teacher's presence and are being invited as a people to follow those teachings. There's no singling out here. While there are certainly times in the gospels where Jesus calls people by name and is very deliberate about each person knowing how much he loves him or her, the goal here is to invoke the community—to reassure them of their worth and importance as a body.

Along those same lines, consider the use of the metaphors "salt" and "light." Salt and light by themselves don't make for a delicious dish or a beautiful day.

"These metaphors themselves bespeak a communal reality. That is, salt is most effective in its work when it is used with other elements. In culinary matters, salt works in tandem with other food to bring out the best flavor. For many sacrifices described in the Old Testament, salt accompanies the sacrificed meat or food.

"As a metaphor, light also functions somewhat communally. That is, in the absence of anything else, light serves little function. Rather, for light to be the most effective, it must emerge within a poorly illuminated environment to brighten that which already exists so that it may be perceived by others in that space." (Working Preacher, February 5, 2023)

So, Jesus, maybe somewhat unwillingly, highlights the reality that for faith to be realized, the participants can't exist on an island, or by themselves.

It's possible for us as individuals to believe in the God who made us, to believe that Jesus came as God's son to forgive and redeem us—to grant us new life. But to have faith—a growing and maturing faith (sometimes in the most trying times of our lives), we find that we can't do it alone. We are most vibrant—our saltiest and our brightest—when we are together.

Speaking of that, now look at the second words of verses 13 and 14. They're the same: are. You "are" the salt of the earth, and you "are" the light of the world.

Notice that Jesus didn't say we should "be" salt and light or "will be" salt and light. No, to Jesus, those he was preaching to those who were

already salt and light. There was nothing more they had to do to be the catalysts for God's work to be done in the world.

That's true for us, too. Sometimes, as individuals and as communities, we assume we must be a certain size, have a certain mission statement, have a threshold of financial resources, or attain a certain level of intellectual wisdom in order to qualify ourselves for salt and light status. But here, Jesus is telling those around him that they already have what it takes.

For example, he'd be telling us right now that we don't have to be the big box church down the street to be salt of the earth. We don't have to have our church advertised on billboards or in radio spots to be the light of the world. Or we don't have to have a million dollar budget to be salt and light. We already have right now what it takes.

This part of the passage is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The "are" indicates an existing condition rather than prescribing one.

Now, if you look at verse 16, you might think Jesus is indeed prescribing a behavior, prescribing his listeners to be light. He says, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works..."

That's prescriptive, isn't it? Well, not really. Instead, that which comprises the human essence already (for example, "light") is simply instructed to be made even more manifest than what it already is. It is not for humans to accomplish any particular work. Humans are simply to allow their core essence to be made more evident.

And that really is freeing and takes the pressure off us as a community. We don't have to attain anything. We have what it takes; it's already inside us.

Here at FPC, everything for doing successful ministry is right in front of us. There's the talent, there's the will to act, and there's the presence of God's Spirit turning what we have to offer into Holy acts of ministry.

We should not be bashful in thinking that our worship, our discipleship, our outreach, or our fellowship are inferior. God has already given us what it takes to be faithful.

Starting in verse 17, Jesus makes a shift. He goes from reinforcing how communities of faith already have the wherewithal to engage in

faithful ministry (“you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world”) to making a connection between what he is preaching and his historic faith community.

In verses 17-20, he seems to shift from this descriptive mode to a prescriptive one. He talks about the law and keeping the law. In other words, he seems to offer a prescription for faithfulness.

“Don’t think that I’ve come to abolish the law or the prophets,” he says in verse 17. “I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” He’s lifting up rule-following as a key ingredient of being faithful. “Until heaven and earth pass away,” he says in verse 18, “not one letter will pass from the law until it is accomplished.” And in verse 20, he’s even more striking: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness (upholding the law) exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

He’s prescribing a behavior: keeping the law in order to be faithful. Keeping the law, being righteous, was key. And why was that? Or why is it today? Is rule-following a key to our salvation?

No. Our salvation doesn’t hinge on whether we follow the rules. But it’s important to Jesus. And it was important to Jesus then because keeping the law was a central piece to maintaining his Jewish faith.

Jesus was a Jew, a faithful Jew. And his coming as Messiah did not erase the Jewish law. His presence simply fulfilled it. The law is grounded in love for God and neighbor. And it was fulfilled in the ways Jesus himself, as God’s son, loved his heavenly father and those he came to save.

Thus, we imitate one who upheld and celebrated the Jewish faith. Jesus’ teachings, then, are best understood as those of a Jewish reformer, not as those of one who is attempting to denigrate and displace an “outdated” religious system.

So, there’s another communal element to this entire passage. In addition to the second person plural (y’all) in verses 13 and 14, which indicate that Jesus was strengthening and reaffirming his early community of followers, in these last verses he’s simultaneously upholding the historical connection between his own time and Moses’ by upholding the importance of the law.

Even then, to Jesus, it was more about “we” than “I.” He was part of a community, a community that found its identity in being the chosen people of Israel. And Jesus never wanted to sever his ties to that community, even as one who is Messiah.

So we can’t read this passage today without coming back again and again to the firm conviction that faith is first and foremost played out and strengthened in community. It’s within the community of faith that God has already made us “salt and light.” And in our quest to grow more faithful, it’s the community more so than any other entity that will get us there.

If you’re struggling individually in some matter of faith, don’t worry about it. Just stick with the community. You’ll be ok. For it’s here that God has already given us all we need to be salt and light.