

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³“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 underfoot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore, 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Lord, open our understanding by the power of the Holy Spirit, that as the Word is proclaimed we may receive holy wisdom to understand the gifts you have bestowed upon us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Confession: *more often than not*, the reason I obey the rules of the road is selfish; I don’t want to get a ticket and have to pay a fine. However, if that is my frame of mind – being concerned only with obedience for my own good – I am acting like a scribe, or a Pharisee; I am no more righteous than they were.

Scribes and Pharisees were scholars of the Holy Scriptures and focused their attention on the interpretation of the Law. It also seems like they made fulfilling the Law a point of personal pride. And according to scripture they did not hesitate to point a finger at those who transgressed the Law.

So I could be perfect at keeping the rules of the road; driving the speed limit, stopping completely at stop signs, yielding right of way, passing only when it was safe to do so, etc., but if my reason for obeying the letter of the law was to avoid a ticket, then again, my righteousness would be no better than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus said our righteousness must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees or we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees took pride in their righteousness, and they claimed their righteousness by strictly abiding by the letter of the Law. Jesus’ however, made a distinction between merely *keeping* the Law, and *fulfilling* the Law which included honoring God’s intended purpose for the Law.

So if our righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, how are we to follow our traffic laws, for example? Is it not a matter of our motivation? If our motivation is selfish, to avoid being ticketed, we are sitting on the scribes and Pharisees’ bench. But if our motivation is to protect and uphold the public safety, then we have honored the intent of the law, and thus it could be said that we have surpassed the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness.

If you’ve ever experienced someone’s reckless driving, you most likely felt righteously angry that your safety and perhaps even your life was put in jeopardy by the another’s carelessness. Experiences like that can remind us that the intent of the law is to protect us from harm. Having clarified this distinction between keeping the law and fulfilling the purpose of the law, I find myself driving with greater awareness of others.

We are called to live by the intent of the law, and this is the righteousness that Jesus was getting at which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. The prophet Micah offered a very concise version of God’s intention for the law, it is: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

Notice that God’s intent has to do with how we actually live out the law in relationship to others, for it is certainly possible to obey the law and not be concerned with anyone else. The spirit of the law, however, has to do with how we live in relationship to our sisters and brothers.

Therefore, the call to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is a call to live out of our God-given identity. And what is that? Jesus put it plainly: ***you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.*** “Salt” and “light” are not our name tags; they are rather, symbols of how we are to live in this world. The substance, salt, and visible light surely make a difference in our lives. When Jesus said we are *salt* and *light* he meant that our lives too, are to make a difference in this world.

So to live out our God-given identity is to be *like* salt and use our lives to enhance the flavor of the world, to add savor to the world, that is, to make the world a better place: be “salt” for others.

To live out our God-given identity is to be *like* light and illuminate the way of the kingdom of heaven; to reveal the kingdom’s presence; to reveal the way of salvation for those lost in the darkness of sin, loneliness and despair: be light for others.

I’ve been reading *The Book of Joy* which is an account of a weeklong meeting between his holiness, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Archbishop Tutu was the architect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which brought healing following the end of apartheid in South Africa. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, and has lived in exile in India for over 50 years. In spite of all their struggles, these two great friends exude an abundance of joy. Laughter comes easily to both of them, as if from some kind of gushing spring of joy in their souls.

During their time together at the Dalai Lama’s residence, Archbishop Tutu and his daughter Mpho, presided over a service of communion. This was an extraordinary event. In Archbishop Tutu’s tradition, communion is not offered to non-Christians. And in the Dalai Lama’s Buddhist tradition, alcohol of any kind is not consumed. Just the same, they celebrated Communion together and honored the intention of love’s call for unity. “We are all the same,” the Dalai Lama often says.

What a reminder that while we live in a world of differences, both in belief and practice, we do not have to be divided! The sad truth is that religions often serve to separate people by defining who is accepted and who is not. When will we learn that diversity and difference are gifts for all of us! Our strength is born in diversity and difference. Just look at the stunning diversity of God’s creation; God made us this way for our own benefit!

How did Jesus respond to the diversity of the earth’s people? Jesus said he came that all may be one. Jesus didn’t call us to love only our own kind; Jesus called us to love one another, even our enemies!

Communion is a sacrament of unity in our tradition. I believe in an open table, welcoming all. After all, Jesus is the host at this table and

we know that Jesus ministered to everyone who came to him, regardless of humanly constructed separations or barriers. Jesus ministered to enemy and friend, men and women, Jew and Gentile, young and old, clean and unclean, saint and sinner. This table then is open to us, and to all of the above. We come to this table as salt and light for each other.

I have a short video to show you that illustrates what may be a fundamental ingredient in our quest to be salt and light in our world. The video is about a man named, Karim, an Arab-American, who made himself courageously vulnerable in the public space of New York City. I would like to suggest that through his vulnerability, Karim, not only became salt and light, but inspired an experience of the kingdom of heaven come near.

Is vulnerability a pathway to becoming salt and light?

Is vulnerability a pathway to compassion?

Is compassion a pathway to our becoming salt and light?

Is trust a pathway to becoming salt and light?

Is loving a pathway to becoming salt and light?

Text of Karim’s poster:

Hello, my name is, Karim, and I am an Arab-American, like many people who are **BLACK, BROWN, WOMEN LGBTQIA, LATINX, MUSLIM, JEWISH, IMMAGRANTS and OTHER**, I am very Scared. We are anxious and uneasy in our own country and it’s difficult to see what lies ahead for US. But I have **HOPE** that I am SAFE with YOU. Together we can build a community of caring rather than one of FEAR. You can trust me to care for you no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you are from. Will you embrace me as willingly as I embrace you? Will you shake my hand and/or HUG me and/or take a photo with me and post it as a sign that I am safe here with you? I TRUST YOU.

The video can be found by searching/googling: Karim Sulayman – I trust you (I found the youtube version loaded faster)