

"You are," are the first words of Jesus in our gospel reading for today. They are two small words that we easily overlook in light of the rest of what he says, but they are key to understanding everything else. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." And in the next verse he says, "You are the light of the world." Notice he did not say, "You could be... the salt of the earth." Or, "Do the right things and I will make you... the light of the world." Or, "Believe in me and..." No, he said, "You are..." It is a statement, not a condition and not a demand.

Who did he say this to? Was it a hand-picked select group? Was it Peter, James and John, the three closest disciples? Was it to the 12 disciples, his core followers? No, he says this near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. He says it to the crowds that have gathered around him.

In other words, this is not secret insider teaching, and this is not a status for a few. It is a proclamation to the masses, to all who have come to him. It is a proclamation to us

too. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

It is important for us to remember these things. They are God's gift to us, God's empowerment of us. If Jesus had said, "Strive to be salt, light, and a city built on a hill," then we'd be on a quest, a spiritual journey of accomplishment to greater righteousness. But Jesus says we already are these things. Therefore don't try to hide them.

One of the constant challenges of faith is to recognize that our faith is God's work, not ours. And, that God give us everything we need. A typical Lutheran response to things is to say that now that you know you are saved by God, what are you going to do with it? All too often people will say, "Well, if I don't have to do anything to be saved, then why do anything at all!" But that is exploitation of faith and freedom.

In Martin Luther's writing "The Freedom of a Christian" he starts off with two contradictory but true statements. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to

all." These aren't thoughts new to Luther, he's just citing St. Paul's thoughts in 1 Corinthians 9 and Romans 13. Paul, and later Luther, are picking up on the deep root of faith.

It is impossible to use words to describe this deep root of faith, for it is beyond words. In "Freedom of a Christian" Luther writes that either you have experienced it or you haven't. If you have then it needs no explanation. If you haven't, then no amount of words will teach it; for it is truly God's work.

But perhaps we can get at it if we use the image of adolescence and dating. Put yourself in that time if you can and remember what you felt. What was it like when someone you really liked walked in the room at school or at church or at some event? You get butterflies in your stomach. You're nervous. You want to make a good impression. You may try to hide, or you may do something clownish to get attention. You're scared that the object of your love may discover your true feelings - which could possibly lead to embarrassment. Then let's say this wonderful person makes some gesture that he or she also likes you. You go out on a date. And how do you

prepare? You put effort into looking extra good. Nice clothes, women may put extra effort into their hair and makeup. And how do you act? Well, you try to impress. You do what you think the other person will find attractive. You laugh at all the person's jokes, whether they are funny or not. And you suppress everything about yourself that you think isn't attractive.

If this relationship actually goes somewhere, sooner or later you're going to have to reveal that, but not just yet. You figure you'd better hook the other person on you more thoroughly before you show your less likeable side.

Are you being honest? No. You're actually being deceptive. Call it 'sweet scheming' perhaps. You're acting in a way that will ultimately get you what you want.

But, when a healthy relationship does begin to develop you don't have to be so afraid of appearing imperfect. You discover that the other person is attracted to you despite your flaws. Love can grow in strength and confidence.

In a good marriage the love should grow so strong as to be unconditional - or nearly unconditional. Sadly, many marriages never get there, but that is beside our point today. Being in a durable, solid, mutually loving relationship with someone is very empowering.

I believe many people see their faith in God like the early stages of a dating relationship. They try to be on their best behavior for God. (They suppress the idea that God can see through their false front.) They also are doing it for their own ends. Faith is a scheme, a deal to ultimately get their selfish desire - eternal life. But deep faith is more like a marriage; solid, robust, enduring.

Love is no longer a scheme, it is no longer a means to another end. It is an end unto itself. The nature of this love, and confidence in it is completely freeing. Yet because it is completely freeing you are compelled to act upon it. In terms of faith you find yourself thinking, "I have no option but to live out this faith. It is the only response that I can do." It is, as the prophet Jeremiah describes it, an unquenchable fire.

When Jesus says, "You are salt... light... a city built on a hill," he is speaking of this depth of faith.

Perhaps we feel that. Perhaps we don't. Even great Christians like St. Paul recognize that they don't always feel that power as fully as they want. Martin Luther describes feeling only a scant supply of true faith. Yet that is all that is needed.

We live in a world that is flavorless. Even though we dump tons of salt on our roads every year, it needs more salt - the salt of faith. We live in a world that is dark. Even though we have massive power generations stations and millions of watts of light available at the flip of a switch, it needs more light - the light of faith. Even though we have many cities on hilltops and many are so big they can be seen from space, our communities are dark and hidden. They are infested with rats, plague and overflowing with filth. They need the city of -no, the community of- faith built on a hill.

Feeling powerful or weak, we do God's work. There is no formula for it, and there is no check list either. It is living out our response to the faith that God inspires that does it. It only requires some confidence, some courage to not cover the light, or make the salt flavorless, or hide the city. Instead we let what God has made us be wholly known to all. Amen