

Last week, we heard the Lord say that we are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We are not light to the world if we say, "Well, I don't murder people, I don't commit adultery, I don't perjure myself." Most people on earth do not murder, commit adultery or commit perjury. The Lord is teaching us here that being salt and light is deeper than that. Jesus says, "You've heard it said, 'you will not commit murder.' What I say is, avoid stupid anger, abusive words, despise for others.

We can destroy people in more subtle ways than murder. We can destroy people through hatred, defamation. We can destroy a person's good name by the wounding insult, by trivializing their self-worth, by dropping suggestive and malicious hints about their character. We may not stab people in the heart, but we can surely stab them in the back.

We are "light" when we respect human dignity, when we do not engage in the personal insult and ridicule that spread so much in our society today. Do you know someone who respects people even though he or she disagrees with them? I have seen one. That person is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' What I say is, avoid the infidelity of the heart," which means the fantasizing and the disengagement from the life of the family that can dry up family life and separate people even though they all live in the same house.

We are also light when we nourish and commit ourselves to family life, not family life in general but to our family's life. I guess all of us have seen someone who is deeply committed to his or her family? In a culture where family life is so easily neglected, they are the light of the world, the salt of the earth.

Jesus says, "You have heard it said, "'Do not bear false witness, that is, do not commit perjury.' What I say is, avoid the need to swear an oath." The Lord says that our word should be clear and reliable, in and out of court, instead of loaded with, half-truths, mental reservations, always crossing our fingers. In a world where human conversation becomes a game so that even though we know what people are saying, we are not sure what they mean, Jesus is calling us to be people of the truth, whose yes is yes, whose no is no. For sure we know or have seen someone whose word is dependable and reliable. That person is the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

Jesus is teaching us to look within because attitudes precede actions. The Lord is saying that the real measure of violence in our society is not found in the crime statistics but in all the ways we put people down, despise others, hold grudges so that the taking of life becomes just the next step in a world already steeped in hate. The measure of the breakdown of family life does not come from the number of divorces but from the lack of serious commitment and responsibility to our family relationships. The degree of untruth in our human society is not measured by the number of perjuries but by all the lies and evasions and deceptions and half-truths that we see in so many parts of our societies.

In such a world, to be salt and light is to be someone who respects others, to be someone of fidelity, and to be someone of truth. What can we draw from these challenging words of Christ? There is a tendency today to say that we are products of our environment because our souls look like they are picking up what is out there. "Everybody does it." But we do not have to be like everyone else. We do have a choice. The Lord is also teaching us that our Christian identity is defined not only by what we don't do murder, adultery, false witness but by what we do. We always have the chance once more to renew our life, to examine the choices we are making, to look at the fidelities that are shaping our life. Where do these choices come from?

Each Sunday is a call to reorganize our lives into places of salt and light. We can only do so much about the world around us. We can do a lot about the world inside us.