



A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

February 9, 2020, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5:13-16

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Hey, how is everybody doing out there? Pew cushions soft enough for you? Temperature about right? I am so very glad you are here today. Looking out at all of your bright faces I am grateful that each of you has made the effort to be in worship.

It is the natural default mechanism of most clergy to seek to make the people around them feel comfortable. It does not mean we will not ruffle feathers if it is absolutely necessary but it is rarely our first inclination. Spending so much time seeking to put people at ease, the shadow side of me makes me think about ways it might be fun to make people feel uneasy.

I have a theory that looking someone deeply in the eyes and asking them the same particular question intently and over and over again will make them uncomfortable. It is a simple little question; a question that is probably easily answered the first time it is asked, and maybe the second or third time it is not too tough. But after that it could make a person increasingly uncomfortable.

So, the question; who are you? Such a tiny question, three words, three mere syllables, nine miniscule letters. What is there possibly to fear about it? Who are you? I am an attorney, or a teacher, or an artist. I ask it again, who are you? I am a wife, or a father, or a daughter.

Again, who are you? I am a New Yorker, or an American, or a Manhattanite. Again, who are you? I am a reader, or a skier, or a traveler. Again, who are you?



Once we work our way through the external labels and our activities, the ones that help us place ourselves in certain expected roles and contexts, the question becomes more challenging. You might shift your answer from roles and activities, to adjectives. I am sensitive, or brash, or kind. But what lies beneath those qualities of personality? Who are you existentially, at the very core of your being? Not, who do people think you are; or who do you want to be; or who should you be; who are you? Deep down.

Today's scripture text comes from a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is the proclamation of a new age. A time in which the persecuted are blessed and the meek inherit the earth and those who mourn are comforted. Jesus' sermon not only describes what the world is in this new age but who you are. You are salt and light.

Now it is important to note what is not said. Jesus does not say you should become salt and light. Or, you might become salt and light. Or, you will become salt and light. He says, you are salt and light. Right now, you are salt and light. Not if you start praying for two hours every day, or lose twenty pounds, or memorize one hundred Bible verses. You are salt and light, right now. In the deepest part of who you are beyond all the labels and layers, you are salt and light.

Some of us are a little anxious to dig down beneath all the layers of our identity for what we might find down there. We wonder if at our very core we might find solely a collection of our faults and failings. Deep down are we really made up of an amalgam of the less than worthy ways we can be some times? Do those moments when we are petty or selfish, or less than kind, speak to who we truly are, underneath who we try to show to the rest of the world?

Well, take it from Jesus, who you are, who you really are is salt and light. You are not the image you seek to portray before others. You are not the stuff you try to conceal from the world. You are salt and light. Of course this begs the question, what does it mean to be salt and light? At first glance it may seem as if these are two disparate things, a spice and electromagnetic radiation. However, in the way they function for us, they share an incredibly important property. Neither one has



much to offer solely on its own. But what they do in relation to other things is invaluable.

Do not offer me a teaspoon of salt by itself. Blech. But salt is a delightful and frankly essential addition to a French fry. A French fry without salt is not worth the potato that was sliced to produce it. I could run through a whole host of mouthwatering foods that are essentially completed with the addition of a dash of salt. Salt has the remarkable ability to enhance the flavor of the dish to which it is added.

Light, solely on its own, in a vacuum serves no purpose to us. But, light, reaching out into the wider world is a base necessity by which all seeing beings navigate the world. Now, in the city it is pretty much ubiquitous. We are never without it. I can wake up in the middle of the night and the light streaming through the windows from the adjacent buildings makes me wonder if it is already morning. But if you get out into the country on a cloudy moonless night and step out into the backyard, you realize just how utterly essential light is. Without light we are helpless to see anything at all and navigating the world becomes an incredible challenge. Light allows us to see everything that surrounds us.

Who are you? You are salt and light. As followers of Jesus Christ, you play two important roles in the world. Like light, your faithful presence illuminates and shows the presence and existence of the divine. Without your embodied witness of faithfulness how can others see that God is indeed in our midst? And like salt you make what you touch better, you enhance it, you improve it. Your faithful actions in the world allow for God to go about creating this new age when indeed the persecuted are blessed, and the meek inherit the earth, and those who mourn are comforted.

Now before we get all uppity about how grand and important we are, let us remember who Jesus is telling us we are, salt and light, not so incredibly exciting left on their own. In light's case, it is what it reveals that is important. In our case, it is the ways in which our faithfulness points toward the presence of God. It is to what we point and thus make known that is the headline. Salt's purpose is found in



how it enhances and improves the food to which it is added. Our purpose is found in how our faithful actions, in the service of the divine, enhance and improve the conditions of this world.

I am grateful what this text has to teach us about who we are. We are inherently valuable and essential. But our value and precious essence is not so much about ourselves but about our connection with our God and our purpose serving God in the world. This reality of who we are denies any feelings of insecurity and unworthiness we harbor. And it also does not let us begin to believe that we are the center of the universe.

The challenge is actually owning this reality of being salt and light; of recognizing who we are in the deepest parts of who we are; of moving beyond both our insecurities and our arrogance, which keep us from seeing our true selves. This brings to mind a story that Rabbi Alan Lew used to share about the Ebo tribe in Africa. While their children are sleeping, parents gather by their bedsides and whisper in their ears, “Become who you are. Become who you are. Become who you are.”¹

I love the image of this and what it represents. I can imagine the Holy Spirit whispering this call in our ears every night as we sleep. Become who you are. Become who you are. Become who you are. We are not called to be something we are not. We are not called to be better than we truly are.

We may live in a world that is flawed and we certainly make flawed choices all of the time. I can make three flawed choices before breakfast. But God’s economy of creation is not flawed. The essence of who we are, created by our God, is salt and light. We were created to illuminate the presence of our creator God and to enhance and improve the world around us.

Now I can hear you old school Calvinists in the back pew mumbling about our total depravity. Our total inability to not fall into sin. Yes. I cannot argue with that. But I would respond by saying all of that brokenness does not proceed from

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



who we are at our deepest level, who we truly are. Rather it comes from the layers of identity and bad choices we have made.

These babies we just baptized, Stiles and Courtland, does anyone doubt for a moment that they are salt and light? Their very existence points toward a gracious and generous Creator God. And certainly their presence in our midst has enhanced this world of ours.

Who are you? You are salt and light. And Jesus Christ's call on your life is clear. Let your faithfulness reveal God in our midst. And your actions bring healing to a world in need. Become who you are. Become who you are. Become who you are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Lew, Alan, *Be Still and Get Going*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2005, p129.