

"Who Are You?"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT – Feb. 5, 2023

Please Read:
Isaiah 58:1-9a
Matthew 5:13-20

I'll never forget waking up in the middle of the night in my freshman college dorm to my neighbor's identity crises. John would come home around 1:00 a.m. and play British rock band *The Who*, with Peter Townsend singing, "Who Are You?" at full volume. I had stereo and sound system envy, as even through the dormitory walls it was like I had a front row seat at a Who concert...

Who Are You is a question we were all asking of ourselves in college, and a question we continue to ask in different seasons of life. As a freshman my first roommate was Travis, a gay senior graduating with a drama and theater arts degree. He was one of the funniest people I've ever met, but I learned a lot about what it was like to be a gay man even in progressive Portland as once in a while he would come back to the room after his nights on the town bruised and bloodied from being roughed up by Neanderthals who didn't understand sexuality complexity. Travis was asking himself, "Who Are You?" in a world that still has trouble accepting who he really is.

It's a question that sometimes tortures the soul. I don't know how young people make it these days. It used to just be *What am I going to do* and *who am I going to marry?* Now it's what is my sexual orientation, am I monogamous or polyamorous? Or do I even care, because the world is going to end with Climate Change or nuclear war or some AI disaster?

It's not any easier later in life... *Who Are you?* is an increasingly elusive question as we change from singularity to married status, and then adding the identity of father or mother... Changes in jobs and income levels, divorce or the death of a loved one can precipitate a crisis of who are...

Jesus makes some bold assertions about who we are. It's surprising, really, as most religious leaders try to tell us what we ought to do to become a better person. Jesus begins with blessings and declarations on who we already are.

It's not like Jesus doesn't give guidance. To be sure, in the gospel according to Matthew he issues imperatives like, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). "Follow me..."(4:19). "Judge not, that you be not judged" (7:1). "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way easy, that leads to destruction" (7:13). "Bear fruit! Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (7:19)... In our text today Jesus reminds us that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Matthew is largely the gospel of responsibility, accountability. You ought, should, and must.

But as we read last week in his opening remarks of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowd, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek." It's a radical shift from should, ought, or must! Jesus begins with blessings, blessings upon those who are unblest, outsiders, failures by the way the world judges success and failure.

Then, in verse eleven, the Beatitudes shift from the third to the second person. Jesus turns from the suffering multitudes toward his own disciples, toward us, and says: "Blessed are *you*..." Can you see? Blessed are *you*. What he says now, he says just for you. And we begin to squirm a bit with his gaze fixed so directly upon us. "Blessed are you when they revile you, persecute you, utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account... that's the way they treated the prophets before you" (5:12). The implication is that the little rag-tag band of fishermen, tax agents, and others in off the streets - are in Jesus' view prophets!!

Imagine the scene... Simon Peter squints in the sun. Nathaniel nudges Mary Magdalene who rolls her eyes. Us? Prophets? "Yes!" says Jesus. "Prophets. Interpreters and truth-tellers of Israel. *You*. And then he says the most amazing thing: "*You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the whole world!*"

Greek Nerd spoiler alert: Unlike the English, Greek needs no pronoun before a conjugated verb, unless it is used for emphasis. Matthew employs the pronoun here in order to underscore the YOU. So, "It's not just "You are the salt of the earth,...the light of the world," it's "YOU are salt,...YOU are light." The Gospel made personal. Note that he doesn't say you *should* be salt, or that you *should* be light. He says you ARE. Here is the Gospel in the indicative mood.

I wonder that any in that rumpiled bunch, squatting in the dust of that Galilean hillside, could take it in. What a way to begin the transformation of the world! What a way to continue transforming the world...

Salt. Tiny grains, yet utterly essential in its uses. Salt is not significant in itself. I don't know anybody who just eats salt. But oh, how wonderful a little dash of salt is on eggs, or vegetables, or meat. Or after the service today when we enjoy some hot soup! Salt enhances flavor - It brings out more of the essential flavor. Note that Jesus did not say, "You are the Ghost Pepper sauce of the world!" painfully numbing the senses to any other flavor. On the contrary, salt is to enhance and appreciate, not overpower or depreciate the flavor of the food on which you sprinkle it. Salt is also used as a purifier, a preserver, but Jesus isn't talking about that. He's talking about salt as essential for flavor. We are the ones through whom God seeks to bring the flavor of life back to the world.

You disciples, so small in number. Yet sprinkle a few of you around in our town, there's no telling what you'll stir up, no telling what you'll savor. Without

you, the whole earth would lose its zest. Without you, it would be boringly insipid! How do you like that? You, the followers of Jesus, are to add a little zip to the life of our times.

There are precious little opportunities to intelligently discuss one's faith publicly, because many abruptly dismiss Christianity as irrelevant. We are still living in the aftermath of Nietzsche's God is dead parable. "We have killed him, you and I," the madman shouts. Nietzsche's point was not that God is dead because God doesn't really exist. God is dead because *we christians* live, play, procreate, govern, and die as though God doesn't exist!¹

Typically, colleagues in ministry want to know how many people show up for our services on a Sunday morning." I think a great answer should be from now on, "Not that many, but enough to get the job done... We don't get hundreds out for worship on Sundays, but just enough of the right people to keep the town of New Canaan livened up." As Jesus says, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

Light, like salt, is powerful even in small doses. Like salt, light is mainly of significance in what it illuminates. You don't stare at a light bulb. Light is valuable in that it enables us to see something else. Switch on a light, and a dark room is transformed. Light adds depth and perspective, colors and contour. As C.S. Lewis famously once said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

"You are the light of the whole cosmos," says Jesus. Without you, the world cannot see the way forward. The light of kindness. The light of generosity. The light of neighborliness. The light of anti-racism. The light of radical inclusion. The light of art. The light of music. The light of listening without talking. The light of calling people by the name they choose. The light of holding space for people until they're ready to move into it. The light of a non-anxious presence in the world. The light of hope. The light of courage. The light of love..

The world must see just one free person still running loose before we see how enslaved we are to a host of cruel masters. According to Jesus, You are light for the world. Hide your light under a basket, and everyone stumbles.

The world is right in judging the truth of Jesus by the sort of people faith in Jesus is able to produce. I've been struck by the historic visit of Pope Francis, Justin Welby, and Iain Greenshields' peace mission to South Sudan. 400,000 people have died in the ongoing conflicts there. Father John Gmemboyo

¹ Referenced on-line February 3, 2023: <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/madman.html>

Mbikoyezu confessed, “We are a majority Christian country, but what we are practicing is not in keeping with Christian values.”²

The thorny question is then: Are you being salt and light in your neck of the cosmos? Are you making life better where you are? Do you bring color, true perspective and clarity to life; or gray, empty compliance and assimilation? Karl Barth wrote in *The Faith of the Church*, "The only advantage of the Church over against the world is that the Church knows the real situation of the world. Christians know what non-Christians do not... It belongs to the Church to witness to the dominion of Christ clearly, explicitly, and consciously."

We know that God does not want more religion. God wants what is good, fair and true for all. As the prophet Isaiah declared, our light shall break forth like the dawn when we loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our house; when we cover the naked, and not hide from our own family responsibilities...

I was intrigued about a pyro-technician who died and was cremated. Instead of potting his ashes, his family had his remains stuffed into a fireworks and had him literally light up the sky. That’s a parable for those of us who are the light of the world. How can we give our lives to brighten the world more brightly?

Jesus says that salt that has stopped being salt is *morante*, ie *moronic* folly. The point here is that the Gospel, like salt, will never lose its flavor - *but we can sure lose ours* - if we part company from Jesus, if we live by fear and not faith, if we live by our self-centered ways instead of the scandalous way of the cross through self-giving love...

As we prepare to receive from this table, may Jesus’ word of grace not become a word of judgment. We may be confused at various times in life about who we are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer concludes his famous poem *Who Am I?*... “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!” Yes, come what may, we are in Christ. And Mr. Light of the World still declares,

“*You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world!”

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

² Referenced Feb. 5, 2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64500535>