

Remember Who You Are

© Bishop Greg Mohr
 First, Vancouver
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 5th Sunday after Epiphany B

Appointed Texts:
 Matthew 5:13-20
 1st Corinthians 2:1-12(13-16)
 Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

“Back in high school,” writes one author, “every Friday and Saturday night, as I was leaving to go on a date, I remember my mother bidding me farewell at the front door with these weighty words, ‘Don’t forget who you are!’

“You know what she meant,” he writes. “She did not mean that I was in danger of forgetting my name and street address.

“She meant that, alone on a date,
 in the midst of some party,
 in the presence of some strangers,
 I might forget who I was.

“I might lose sight of the values with which I had been raised,
 answer to some alien name,
 engage in some unaccustomed behaviour.

“‘Don’t forget who you are,’ was her maternal benediction
 as I left home.

He suggests that “it is sometimes difficult in modern life, amidst the conflicting claims and confusion of names, to remember who we are.

“We are forever answering to some false name,
 forever misunderstanding who we are and by
 whom we are named. It is easy to forget.”

(Willimon, Remember Who You Are, 105)

We are now well into this season of Epiphany.

One month ago we celebrated the appearance of the magi to the Christ child.

They were the first Gentiles to whom Jesus was “made known.”

And it is from those words (“to be made known”) that we get the word “Epiphany.”

It is an “aha!” moment;
 a making known; a revealing.

This Epiphany season, which will last 9 lengthy weeks this year,
 is a time for us to explore and learn what this revelation of God as
 Jesus means to us and for us.

And at the heart of figuring those things out is, first of all,
 remembering who we are.

Who are you?

Your parents gave you a name; maybe several names.

Those are part of who you are.

You also have your own personality; your own interests, ideas, hobbies, activities.

Those also help define who you are.

You have various roles, responsibilities;

perhaps you are a parent or grandparent, a student, a volunteer.

What you work at may also form part of your identity.

If you dig out your wallet and take a good look through it,

you will find that it also tells you a lot about who you are.

Someone once said that the best way to get a sense of who you are, of what you value, and of what your priorities are, is to look at your wallet and chequebook.

But all these things do not tell the most important part of the story.

Who are you?

Today's text picks up where last week's text left off.

This is the famous Sermon on the Mount.

Last week, we heard Jesus speak the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

And on and on it went . . . talking about people who were in life's situations that were considered anything but blessed.

One thing we learn from these Beatitudes is that they are not **prescriptive**; rather, they are **descriptive**.

Prescriptive (same root word as "prescribe," like what the doctor does) means you would hear the Beatitudes as something you must do to be blessed.

"You better watch out, you better not cry,
you better be kind, I'm telling you why."

"C'mon folks. Pick up your peacemaking.

Do better on your mercy exam.

You're flunking pure-in-heartness."

That's what would happen if you thought of the Beatitudes as **prescriptive**.

However, I believe these are *descriptive*.
 They describe who you are.
 They describe what the life of the Christian is.

This is you.
 You – as you open yourselves to God’s leading.
 You – as you experience the pain and sorrow of life.
 You – as you place God first in your lives.
 You – as you hunger and thirst for what is good and true
 and right and honourable in this world.

You – as you show compassion and love.
 You – in whom God creates a new heart.
 You – as you bring peace.
 You – as you sometimes suffer for Jesus’ sake.

And this declaration of identity continues in today’s
 reading from Matthew.

You are the salt of the earth.
 You are the light of the world.

These are incredible metaphors.

And notice the grammar!

Present tense, indicative: You **ARE**.

Not: maybe some day, or you hope to be,
 or if you are good enough.

No. You are.
 You are salt.
 You are light.

At first glance, you may not be all that pleased by the designation of being called salt.

I mean, “light” is a much nicer, more romantic image.

You can get into that kind of thing, I am quite sure:

Lighting up a room.

Bringing light into darkness.

It sounds grand and important and meaningful.

But salt?
 Who wants to be salt?

But think about it.

Salt is one of the most basic substances to be used throughout history.

They are tiny grains, yet utterly essential in its use.

Granted, the overuse of salt is a problem in our society.

So this metaphor may have lost some of its power in our day.

But think of it historically.
 Salt is used as a seasoning.
 Salt adds flavour;
 it brings zest to the tastebuds.

More crucially, though, salt is used as a preservative.
 In our day, that may not be as important as it was in the days before refrigeration and freezers.
 But in much of the world, and through most of history, such conveniences are not
 commonplace.

In Jesus' day, salt was about the only preservative they had.
 Today, we not only have refrigeration and freezing, as I mentioned, but we have
 BHT, BHA, EDTA, propyl glycol, sodium benzoate and a host of other chemical
 configurations to our food.

Salt was their preservative.

And related to that, salt also acts as a purifier.
 Salt has been used over the years to clean wounds,
 to act as a type of antiseptic
 to keep things from rotting.

So think about it: that is an important image of what
 Jesus is getting at.

You are the salt of the earth;
 that is, you act as a preservative in this
 world that is often so destructive,
 so life-sapping, so deadly.

This also is who you are.
 Salt. Light.
 Peacemakers. Merciful.
 Pure in heart. Poor in spirit.

Whenever someone comes to the baptismal font to be baptized,
 after we've gotten them all wet,
 after we've thrown some water on them,
 we tell them some things about their *identity*.

First and foremost, we tell them that they have been joined to Christ.
 His identity has become part of who they are.
 They have been clothed with Christ.
 They have "put on" Christ.

From that time forth and forevermore, they belong to none other
 than Christ.

We also tell them that they shall have a new name;
that the ones their parents gave them are all fine and good
but that there is one more important name –

perhaps we can even say there is one more name that is *more important* than any
name they have already been given – and that is the name, “Child of God.”

“Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the
cross of Christ forever.”

Then we thrust a candle in their hands – fire – and we all know how
dangerous fire is,

and yes, we also know how mysterious and peaceful fire is,
and so it is a very good symbol for this “God the Holy Spirit.”

And as we present the candle, we pronounce words of
calling,

of mission,
of purpose.

“Let your light so shine before others that they
may see your good works and glorify your Father
in heaven.”

Each of us is called to ministry.

That is why a lot of congregations, when listing the ministers in their worship folders, often say
“Ministers: The People.”

Because while I am called and Pastor Hergy is called to one particular type of ministry,
we are all called to be ministers of the gospel of Christ.

So often we look at the term “minister” and think that it means the ordained
person in the congregation, while the term “lay person” means someone who
does not engage in full-time ministry.

From one technical perspective, that is true: ordained people make their
livings in ministry and lay people generally do not.

But from a theological, from a church, point of view – such a view
is disastrous.

After all, as one person said, “Language such as that turns
clergy into purveyors of religion and lay people into
consumers who shop around for the church that offers
them the best product.”

But ministry is something in which we are all engaged – not just on Sundays but everyday.

One story I heard about Mother Teresa is particularly apt. A young man, searching for what his calling might be, asked her for advice. She replied: “Where the needs of the world intersect with your gifts, there is your calling.”

Notice how that dynamic works.

What we **do** arises out of **who we are**.

Your identity, your gifts, your abilities inform your ministry.

You who are salt and light,
you who are poor in spirit,
meek and hungering for righteousness,
you who are merciful and poor in spirit,

now live out your calling in Christ.

Baptized into Christ we are called to the same mission and
the same ministry to which Jesus himself was engaged.

That is our calling.

That is our vocation.

The word **vocation** literally means a call or summons. According to James Fowler, “Vocation is **NOT** our job, our work, or our occupation. It may, of course **include** our job, our work, or our occupation, but it should not be limited to ... one’s source of livelihood....

“(Neither is) vocation ... to be identified with one’s career. It is not the trajectory or failures of the sequence of jobs, professions, or occupations to which one has given oneself.”

“What is vocation, then?” asks Fowler. He proposes the following:

“Vocation is the response a person makes ... to the address of God and to the calling to (be in) partnership (with God).”

“The shaping of vocation as a ...response ... to the address of God involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God’s purposes in the services of God and the neighbour.”

(James Fowler, Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian)

That is pretty heavy stuff.

But what it is reminding us of, is that **because** we have been called by God, all of our life is to be lived in grace – in joyful response and thanksgiving to the grace and love of God.

One of the books I used when doing my doctoral research into the experience of pastors’ children was Fowler’s book entitled, “Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian.” In that book, Fowler makes the distinction between **destiny** and **vocation**.

Destiny dreams, he says, are powerful and attractive. With respect to young people, Fowler says that most often those who are offering destiny dreams give advice.

They say things like, “Be sure to major in something marketable. Get a background that combines business and a specialty in computer technology – that’s where all the growth is going to be.

“When you join your first company, keep your resume always ready. If you are going to get to the top you have got to be within striking distance by the time you are 35; you have no time to dilly-dally or investigate other possibilities.

“Don’t stay with any one company too long; loyalty can be counterproductive if you really want to get ahead.

“If you are going to be a top scientist or mathematician, you don’t have time for volunteer activities – you’ve got to make every moment count. If you are going to get into a good medical school, you have no time to take ‘soft’ courses like literature or philosophy.”

Those are destiny dreams and destiny questions. In contrast, however, questions about vocation are different.

He says we should be asking these questions of our young people. I think he would also agree we should ask them of each other regardless of age – and ask them of ourselves as congregations.

Vocation questions sound like this:

“What seem to be your gifts?

What kinds of things do you do well?

What kinds of activities and contributions really give you a sense of worthiness?

What kinds of things do you find most challenging and fulfilling to do?

There are more vocation questions:

“In what kind of activities do you feel that you are most yourself?

What kind of people do you most admire and would you particularly like to count among your associates?

“Do you feel an inner nudge or call that seems to be pointing you in some particular direction?

What kinds of things do you feel that you and God can do with your life that will make a difference for good in our world?”

As I said, those questions are not just for young people! Those are questions we can ALL ask ourselves.

In fact, those are questions you can ask yourselves as a congregation!

They are good questions to ask because they help you take into account your gifts and your interests.

But vocation is also a matter of responding to the stuff that life throws your way: a child who is sick, a parent or spouse suffering from stroke or dementia, a loss of job, a move to a new place, a friend who is struggling,
and you respond in love and compassion and friendship and grace because that is who you **are** as a child of God.

Vocation does not need to be big and huge as the world measures such things.

Jesus himself said that God's kingdom is brought in when we given even a cup of water to someone in need.

You are the salt of the earth.
You are the light of the world.

And for those times when we doubt our identity,
when we doubt our abilities and our capacity to be God's salt and light in this world,
let us remember those words from 1st Corinthians that we heard earlier today:

"I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

"And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

In another place, Paul states, "But the Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Paul was able to be salt and light precisely because he did not rely on human effort, but on the power of God.

The reason you are able to be salt and light is that God's grace is sufficient for you.

In spite of your imperfections and your denials,
in spite of your sin and feelings of inadequacy,
you are a witness to God's all-encompassing grace.

You are the salt of the earth:
preserving, healing, and seasoning life.

You are the light of the world:
shining in the midst of life's darkness.

You are.
You **are**.