

Sermon – February 5, 2017 by Alex Leach, Seminarian

Who are you?

That question seems deceptively simple. But in fact our answer to that question is very complicated.

There is a spiritual exercise around this question which powerfully reveals all the wrinkles and complications embedded in it. That spiritual exercise is to have a partner sit across from you and ask this simple question: “Who are you?” And you just answer with whatever first comes into your head.

Now the trick to this exercise is that the person sitting across from you keeps asking that one question. And they keep asking you that one question for 6 to 8 minutes. Each time you answer the question they thank you, they acknowledge your answer, and then they ask you this question again:

Who are you?

So when I’m first asked that question I might simply say “I’m Alex.”

Who are you?

“Well, I’m a seminarian.”

Who are you?

“I’m a white heterosexual male living in California.

Who are you?

“I’m someone whose annoyed that I keep getting asked this question.”

Who are you?

“I’m someone who likes comfort and things to be simple.”

Who are you?

“I’m someone who wants to belong and be accepted by others.”

And the exercise just keeps going deeper, and deeper, and deeper.

Hopefully you can see in that just small dip into that exercise that as you keep answering that question your answers become more honest, more vulnerable, and they unearth deeper truths about who you believe you are.

Now our culture has lots of opinions on who you are. And it finds subtle or not so subtle ways of communicating its image of you.

When you see the latest blockbuster hit, where yet again the man saves the woman in distress.

What is that suggesting about who you are?

When you see a Victoria Secret Ad in a magazine that says “The Perfect Body” and behind this is a row of almost all white women who weigh less than 160 pounds.

What is that ad suggesting about who you are?

When you view your favorite nightly news source.

What is the content suggesting about who you are?

Sometimes the identity that our culture is offering us is a healthy one. There are healthy voices in our culture.

But sometimes who our culture suggests we are is an illusion. It’s maybe a pleasant illusion, it makes us feel good, but it is an illusion all the same. And if we buy into that illusion we are like the man who build his house on sand...it will crumble.

And sometimes who are culture suggest we are is just down right destructive. It is easier to sell you things when you think who you are is not enough, and that this object might fill that void. It is easier to have power over someone when they can be convinced that they are powerless and small.

What we believe about who we are dramatically shapes how we are in the world.

And thus it matters whose opinion we listen to.

And that is why Jesus begins the sermon on the mount, the sermon which many say is the most profound and deepest of Jesus’ teachings, by telling you who you are.

Here’s who Jesus think you are.

Jesus sees YOU as the salt of the Earth.

I don’t think we really get the full impact of that in today’s world. You see in Jesus’ day, salt was a staple. It wasn’t just a condiment, it was actually more valuable than gold.

People needed salt to preserve their food. Salt was essential to having stable food and thus to preserve one's life.

Roman soldiers were occasionally paid in salt, and some linguists think that the word salary comes from the word salt.

Think about how dependent you are upon your salary for your livelihood.

That's how dependent people were on salt.

And so imagine, really picture in your mind Jesus telling you:

You are so valuable.

You are essential to preserving life on this planet.

You are worth more than your weight in gold.

Jesus also sees YOU as the light of the world.

Light gives people the gift of sight.

Light offers people the ability to see through the darkness.

Light allows people to see the beauty of creation.

And so again imagine, really picture in your mind Jesus telling you:

You have the power to cast out darkness.

In you people can find all the beauty of creation.

Through you people can see the Divine at work.

Jesus begins the sermon on the mount by reminding his hearers of who they truly are. And if I were to sum it up in one word, who you are is blessed!

You are blessed! That's what we get from the beatitudes, that's what Jesus is saying when he calls you the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

You are blessed.

But our reading today doesn't end there. The committee who put together the three year lectionary decided it was important to also include this part where Jesus clarifies that he is here not to abolish the

law but to fulfill it. Where Jesus says “your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees if you wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Yeah, I didn’t forget about that part.

Again, just to help us really appreciate what Jesus is saying here, we have to remember that for the audience of Matthew’s gospel the scribes and the Pharisees were not bad guys.

Today, because we’ve heard the stories of Jesus calling the Pharisees hypocrites it can be hard to set aside that image of them. But really, to Matthew’s audience the Pharisees were the pinnacle of righteousness. They were the cream of the crop.

So when Jesus is saying “your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees” he is really setting a high bar. It’s like he’s saying “your righteousness must exceed that of a priest or a nun.”

This is the kind of righteousness where your thoughts, words, and deeds are in harmonious integrity.

Why does Jesus set such a high bar? Because Jesus knows who you are.

Don’t forget a few moments ago when you sat in the awareness that you are worth more than your weight in gold. And that through you people can see the Divine at work.

When we stay true to our state of blessedness, with who we truly are, our righteousness can then exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Because if you really knew how blessed you are, how deeply loved by God you are, the way you act in the world would change.

That’s what Jesus means when he says “let your light shine.”

“Share your blessedness with others. Share that love which God has poured out into you with all those, the least and great, that you come into contact with.”

But how do we do that? What does it look like to share your blessedness with others?

To answer that question I want to direct us to another reading in today’s lectionary. Isaiah 58.

I can’t think of a better way to put it than how Isaiah says it here:

Loose the bonds of injustice,
undo the thongs of the yoke,
let the oppressed go free,
and break every yoke

Share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, cover them,
and do not to hide yourself from your own kin

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,