

SERMON: "PUT YOURSELF TO GOOD USE"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 58:1-9
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 5:13-20

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INTRODUCTION

Some arguments last for a long while. Beth Carrol Kivett and I have had a running argument dating back to when we were dating. My wife is a good swimmer. She was North Carolina State Champ kind of good. I like team sports. I was an average athlete but a good teammate. I told her that I think of swimming as an individual sport. She disagreed.

She agreed to a second date ... but still disagrees about swimming. It's a team sport. She points out correctly that it is a swim team, a team competition. I point out just as correctly 'nobody's setting a pick, throwing an outlet pass'. The argument continues until today. But now thanks to Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount, I agree with my wife, "it is a team sport."

An assist goes to Melanie Howard writing for "Working Preacher" about the verses from the Sermon on the Mount that are our lesson today. She writes under the heading, "*Teaching a Community*"

Unlike so many other languages, including the Greek in which this text is written, English is impoverished for its lack of differentiation between the singular and plural second person "you." It is important to note, though, that 5:13-16 is addressed to a plural audience (or, in colloquial terms, "y'all"). That is, no one individual embodies salt or light. Rather, the full community is needed to exemplify that which most resembles the salt and light of which Jesus speaks.

My hope for you with this sermon is that you'll see that Beth and I are both right. She is just more right ... it is a team effort. Each individual plays their part. But those individuals are not on their own. They are part of the whole. And, let me be clear. I'm not just talking about swimming!

I'm talking about being the salt of the earth, the light of the world. That is most definitely a team effort - a 'me' as part of the 'we' thing.

The audience Jesus is addressing with his teaching is you. And I mean you singular and you plural, y'all and all y'all. Both/and instead of either/or. To be more specific, Jesus is talking to the singular you as it connects to the plural you.

YOU JUST ARE

Jesus' words here, like last week with the Beatitudes, are descriptive
You singular and plural ARE the salt of the earth, you ARE the light of the world
You just are ... not just are called to be, ought to be ... but ARE

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Did you pay attention to the sermon title, 'Put Yourself to Good Use'
Let's you know a little bit about how I was raised. I don't sit still well
I told my kids over and over again, 'Do what you're supposed to do first.
then you'll have time to do what you want to do.' It's true. I believe that.
And I practice it. Do my work, do my chores. Then relax

I tell you that because it's true ... and because there is a downside to it.
Here's the downside. I've spent too much time telling myself that my worth
is directly related to my productivity. I am what I do, what I accomplish.
There is some truth in that, but not the whole truth.
My value is in who I am. In my being, not just in my doing.

So again thank you Jesus for telling me singular and us plural who we are.
I am. You are. We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We just are!

Because that is who we are, plain and simple,
Jesus can then tell us to be salty, do some good with that salt
Add some flavor, some spice, preserve something so it lasts longer

Jesus can then tell us to let that light shine. That is a better translation from the Greek,
the language in which the New Testament was written.

The only imperative in this passage "let your light shine" is not possessive
It's not that we shine 'our' light ... "Hey y'all, watch me"
We let the light shine. We reflect it and direct it. Shine, Jesus, Shine!

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is where Jesus says something akin to 'put yourself to good use.'
So let's talk about it, the 'how to' of being salt and light
And let's talk about doing so as a team effort.
Jesus' teaching is for the community, salt and light as a community
You singular and your part of the you plural, a collaborative effort.

YOUR POWER

I think I may have told you. We are grandparents now.
We'll be watching kids TV again before we know it.
I wonder how it has changed and how it has not changed

Back in the day, when our kids were young, I noticed a few patterns
Of course, all the kid stars were, in their own way, charming
It also seemed like a good many of them were in a band
or had some kind of not so secret superpower, like magic
or being really fast or maybe they had cloak that made them invisible

Interestingly positive message to kids – tap into your power.
I like that ... without having to change into color coded costumes
I like it because it is so very true. We all have a power that is uniquely ours
Sure others may have that same magic or mojo or muscle
But we each have that power in our own way.

This fellow sojourner, and member of the swim team, isn't buying any excuses
anything that acts like somebody else has all the power, all the magic
Sure some have more of whatever ... but that doesn't leave you or me
on the side of the pool, in the stands or in the dark

We each have power, enough power to shine whatever light we can
This little light of mine, of yours, of his, hers and theirs
It's not somebody else's job to shine the light ... Not just the job of
someone we elect or pay or who happens to be swimming that event

The message is quite clear "let your light shine before others"
Not yours as in possession, but yours as in partnership and participation
Do your thing as part of the team. Play your part. Set that pick. Add your voice.

You've heard my voice. I've mentioned my singing ability before.
Sometimes you can hear it on the audio (especially those worshipping online).
It's not a voice meant for a solo. No chair is turning for this voice
But yes, music teachers are right. Everyone can sing, can add their voice
Example ... Karaoke. There is one song I can do at karaoke.
The song goes like this ... Tequila

I'm not bragging about my abilities (definitely not).
I'm not advertising for the product that is title of this song.
I'm just showing that everyone, I mean everyone, can add their voice
And you don't have to sing. You can be a good teammate is many ways
You can do the work, good works

This passage does talk about the light ... and good works, ties them together.
So let me say just a bit about good works again tying it to
you singular being part of you plural – being good teammates
and working together to shine that light into the darkness

SUMMARY

Haven't we all experienced walking somewhere with flashlights?

Someone says something and if you're the one with the light
you turn toward them and without thinking shine the light in their face
they quickly correct you and ask you to point the light away, into the dark

So here's an example of people in this community working together
to shine the light into the darkness so we can see where we are going,
lighting a path forward toward a better tomorrow. You remember, in 2018,
Cedar Falls / Waterloo was named the worst place in America
for black people to live – housing, education opportunities, job opportunities

This group is working to address those challenges, particularly jobs
I've been watching some playoff football. Seen a few ads for a local retailer.
several different ads all from the same store, featuring customers and employees
Not a single person of color in any of the ads. Not one.
I'm sure they have black customers, black employees.

I'm not going to point a finger at them, call them racist. That doesn't help.
What would help is for that company to have some conversations
with community leaders about their workplace culture.
How could they recruit and maintain a more diverse staff?
That is a key question for employers across this community and country.

I'm not talking tokenism. I'm not cramming some twisted notion of 'woke'
on any individual or institution. I sure as heaven not replacing anyone.
The present and future of this great nation is a diverse one. Look at Iowa,
the more diverse communities are the ones that are growing.
We would be wise to embrace that diversity, learn how to live together

The group doing that here in the Cedar Valley is called One Cedar Valley
I put some brochures about their work in the commons
Their new executive director is Joy Briscoe, a friend of mine
Cathy Young introduced us. We worked together
on those community wide book reads

Two major employers in our community have already reached out to this group
to ask for their help in developing that kind of workplace culture – CFU
and the Black Hawk County Sheriff's Department. I think that is great.

I am excited about our future as a community because of work like this
because people are finding ways to work together,
to stop shining the light in other peoples' faces ... and shine it forward
into the darkness so we can see where we are going.

I may have limited skills for karaoke and for the butterfly stroke
but I'm going to find a way to let my light shine in ways like this,
shining with others and forward together through the darkness