

SERMON: “JESUS 101 – YOU ARE ...”
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 58:1-9
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 5:13-20

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INTRODUCTION

I should have known better. It is a helpful exercise and it can be kind of fun
But I should have known better. There were tensions among church leadership.
I knew they were there and wanted to address them. I also knew that a good bit
of those tensions were related to me, their pastor. A few people saw me
as a rabble rouser, esp. about civil rights.

I admit it. I have roused some rabble, stirred up some trouble I prayed was good,
especially about civil rights. “Love your neighbor” doesn’t come with exceptions.
Anyway, I should have known better. Like I said, I wanted to address the tensions
head on. So I decided to try this exercise with our church leaders.

It was at an officer’s retreat we had each year. Most of the elders were there, including
one who had issues with his pastor. Don was a well-known man in town
the HR director at the town’s largest employer. He was on all sorts of boards
and committees. Mark also was there to cook for us. He had a catering business
and was also the union president at the town’s largest employer.

The exercise included taking name tags with descriptive terms on each
Nice terms like dependable, kind, good listener, helpful, etc.
and not so nice terms like loose, loud, angry and self-righteous
The way the exercise works is you randomly put the tags on people,
on their backs, so they cannot see but others can

People then walk around, notice the tags on the other people’s backs
then treat them that way. See how it plays out, see if people can figure out
what the tag on their back says. Then, as a group, you reflect on it
and see what lessons might be learned.

Like I said, “I should have known better.” I asked Mark to put the tags
on people’s backs. I noticed him smiling when he put the nametag on
Don’s back. Turns out Don didn’t like the tag on his back – self-righteous.
May have been for a variety of reasons – because I was leading the exercise,
because Mark put the tag on his back, because the tag was a bit too accurate.

I’ll pause that story, get back to it later.

Let’s talk about the nametags Jesus of Nazareth puts on us, his followers
He doesn’t put them on our back. He puts it front and center, tells us who we are.
In the Sermon on the Mount, he gives us two name tags – salt and light.

SALT & LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

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. 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.

These two God-given images are “As Is.”

Jesus doesn't tell us we can, if we work at, be salt and light one day.

He simply says as a matter of fact ... “This is who you are.”

This is not a merit badge to be earned, not a tag someone puts on us

Nor is it a tag we put on ourselves. It is a tattoo inked on us by Jesus.

You are, we are, salt and light. Yes, the ‘you’ here is plural.

This is a “y'all” thing – you singular as part of you plural.

This is not me being my good self all by myself. It is too easy to be part of the mob that cheers on the bullies while being okay with that complicity, that silence, because I personally am not being a bully. I'm a nice person.

We water down the call of Christ when we make it just ‘you’ singular when we make Christianity an individualistic kind of exercise

No. When Christ calls us salt and light, he is calling us into community

So let's talk about what it means for us to be salt and light, individually and together – what they have in common

So, we are salt, the salt of the earth. And what does that mean?

The way we use it in our vocabulary today is that the term is used to describe someone who is honest, hardworking, and dependable. The phrase is often used to compliment someone who is down-to-earth and unpretentious.

That's nice, but is that what Jesus is saying here? I think it is more than that.

The key is that we are salt of the earth as in *for the earth*. Salt is an additive It adds to and enhances. It flavors. I do love my seasonings!

We are not salt just to be salty (think about that term gets used)

We are the salt of the earth ... for the earth

Same thing holds true with Jesus telling us we are the light, the light of (and for) the world. Jesus goes into more detail about how light is to be used You don't hide it under a cover. You let it shine, fill the room.

You let it shine before others so when they see that light, so when they see that good work ... they see God at work.

Light works best when it illumines the darkness, when it penetrates and pushes back the darkness. Light is meant for that.

SETTING THE STANDARD

Now Jesus doesn't just slap a nametag on us and that is that.

The next verses may seem a bit abrupt, a shift. And they are!

Backing up to look at the whole sermon on the mount, these next verses

I would suggest lead us into the pattern that will follow, where Jesus calls us to a higher standard with the refrain "you have heard it said, but I say to you"

The next section (think paragraph) begins with verse 17, about who Jesus is and what he is here to do. **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."**

And it ends with what he expects of us, his followers. **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

Salt and light are meant to be put to good use, for the world

That good use is the difference they can and do make. You've had my cooking, I'd be happy if my headstone were to read ... "It was never said of him, that he under-seasoned his food." What does the recipe say? The recipes and the chefs say, 'Salt to taste.'

I really like how Jesus' teaching lets us know who we are as an "As Is" but then goes on to tell us to go on and use those God-given gifts. Like has been said ... Grace is free, but it is not cheap."

So back to living out what it means to be salt and light, what that looks like
Might I suggest it, in part, it looks like learning from our experiences – trial and error, learning from our "should have known better" moments,
That being the case ... back to nametags on our backs

When I say I should have known better I need to be specific about what I learned
It wasn't that we were wrong to do that nametag on the back exercise
It is helpful to take an honest look at the labels we slap on each other
It wasn't that the timing was not right because of the tensions in the church
Ignoring the tensions only waters the growth of the weeds

Willful ignorance (ignoring the not so good in what we see and hear,
And what we say and do) is part of the problem ... It is not part of a solution.

So, what did I learn from that experience? Be careful with your casting!
Don, now deceased, was a self-righteous kind of guy. The nametag fit too well
Mark knew that when he put that tag on Don's back. He grinned as he did so.
Probably should not have asked him to randomly put the tags on backs
Should have made sure "random" really was random

Most of those name tags (the good and the bad) might well define us,
each of us individually and us collectively, at one time or another

SUMMARY

I'm learning to be careful with any nametags I put on others
They may fit quite well for a moment or longer, but are they so 'spot on'
that one label sums up who that person (and/or those people) really are?
I'm learning to be a lot more random
And a lot more reluctant about labels

Being the salt of the earth, for the earth
Being the light of the world, for the world
That means seasoning and shining
Which I am learning means being reluctant to put signs or labels
on the back of any one of God's children

That is what I am learning. What I need to work on some more is finding
the courage to interrupt the people who are busy slapping labels on others

It is relatively easy for me to talk about labels in a sermon
And it is really easy for me to talk this way since I'm not on social media
I've made a conscious decision not to be because there is so much bullying
and belittling, labeling and lying on X and Truth Social and other platforms

I pay attention to the news reports. I've seen many a post, including the one from
the White House depicting the Obama's as monkeys. I've seen and heard
the reactions to those posts. I've heard both the loud voices and the silence
that, in its own way, seems to speak even louder.

I admit, I am afraid of where we seem to be going as we just ignore the ugliness
when we try to explain it away, when we blame it on someone else or say it was
just a joke (why can't you take a joke, add another label or insult here).

I don't want to be part of that silence. I will stick with what I said earlier.
That exercise we did at the officer's retreat can be helpful in confronting the tensions
and naming the patterns and practices that need to be challenged and changed.

I just need to be humble and careful with the labels ...
especially when I see the person putting the label on
grinning that "yeah, take that" kind of grin
That's when, I think, Jesus would want me to interrupt.

That's how I can shine this little light of mine.