

“Being Who We Are”

“Once people are past middle age, they’re old. That’s how life progresses. You’re young, you’re middle aged, then you’re old.” (Joe Pinsker in *The Atlantic*) This is a direct quote from a recent magazine article that asks the question, “At what age are we considered old?” I found it hard not to react personally to the information, especially because a main source of data is a survey that uses the age of 65 as a threshold. The survey asked if 65-years-of-age qualifies as old. Those between the ages of 18-24 responded, “yes.” Those who were 60 or older said, “no.” It seems that wherever we draw the line that line moves as we get closer to it. This makes sense because an arbitrary age does not determine who we are or how we see ourselves. Many people in their later years are active and involved, enjoying the options that life provides. So, chronological age is not a very good indicator of “oldness.” The article went on to say that identifying people by using the label “old” is becoming less appropriate in our culture. What’s more helpful is to simply identify a person as “older.” As an example, we might say, “There’s a **younger** person over there,” or “Here we have an **older** person.” I read that and smiled, because this is a sliding scale, too. In my life, there was a time when I was consistently the “younger” person in the room and now I’m at a place in life where, more and more, I’m the “older” person in the room. And then, there is this. As I was gathering my thoughts for today’s sermon, I came across another article that nearly took my breath away. I read about a United Methodist Church in Minnesota that has asked all of their members over the age of 60 to worship elsewhere for at least 18 months while they try to woo younger people to their congregation. The pastor explained, “Jesus said we are called to reach new people.” Well, yes, but, “Oh My!” As we reach out to the new people we’re not supposed to forget about the old people. I think Jesus would agree with that. Well, I’m not sure what to say about all of this except to make the point that the words we use to describe ourselves and others matter. Labeling people can be inherently limiting. On the other hand, finding the right words to describe who we are can identify not only our authentic place in this world but our purpose.

So it is that one day, on a mountainside by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus used key words to describe his followers. He labeled his disciples but his labeling did not limit them or stereotype them. Quite the opposite. Jesus defined their place and purpose as those who were saying “yes” to his way in the world. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said. “You are the light of the world.” Salt and light...identifying marks that connected Jesus’ disciples to his mission. The people came to hear Jesus that day because they were experiencing the tremendous way God was working through him. This was his main purpose, of course, to embody the power of God. But Jesus did more than just point to what God was doing in his life. Jesus wanted those following him to experience the influence of God in their lives. His message was, “God is working in you. And because God is working in you, you are salt and you are light.” Now, we don’t know exactly what the crowd looked like that day. No doubt, some were younger and some were older! But that fact is, we don’t have a video or a digital image of those who stood with Jesus by the sea. What we can be certain about, however, is that not all of them were the cream of the crop, at least not by the standard the world has for those who are considered to be the best. Nobody in that crowd would have been able to compete with the scribes and Pharisees when it came to practicing religion. I doubt any of those standing near Jesus that day considered themselves the spiritually elite. Mostly, they were average people. Yes, some were older and some were younger, but some of them were also lonely or lost. Others were doing their best to be good mothers or solid fathers. Some were hoping their families would hold together through whatever tough circumstances they were facing. Others in the crowd were trying their best to make ends meet. Jesus preached his sermon looking out on a collection of hard workers, some of the professionals, most of them responsible, and numbers of them dealing with the weight of stress, while others were celebrating the rewards that come with success. We get the point. When Jesus looked at the crowd he saw the strong and the weak, the sick and the well, the confident and the worried. In other words, they were just like us, a mixture of nearly every kind of situation in life. Jesus looked at them all and told them who they were because of God’s activity in their lives. You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world. This is a good time for each of us to reflect on the labels we claim for ourselves. What best describes us or identifies us in the world? Is it our politics, or our backgrounds, or our occupations, or our economic status? What words point to our place and purpose in the world? Jesus wants us to know how he sees us. We are salt. We are light. We are those who are given the capacity to work with God for the transformation of the world.

This phrase, “the transformation of the world,” is one that we hear often in the church. In fact, it’s part of the mission statement for our denomination. As United Methodists we are “making disciples for the transformation of the world.” That’s a pretty big job description. Transforming the world, how do we take that on? How can one life or even one congregation affect a change in the whole world? Maybe the immensity of a power like Christ, the

Lord, can influence all of creation, but us? Who are we? Jesus says we are salt and we are light. I think Jesus wants to bring our understanding of ourselves closer in. Transforming the world is a noble goal but Jesus himself started with just a hillside by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus didn't say we were transformers of the world. Jesus said we are salt and light. Think about it. Salt is a basic and simple additive. Salt enhances. Salt brings out the best when it's mixed in. Salt preserves and takes what would otherwise be bland and uninteresting, and makes it memorable. And, as for light, well, light shines. Light makes the nearby world clearer. It enables us to see. Light shows the way. Light cuts through the darkness. Jesus doesn't want us to be overwhelmed by what feels like the impossible task of changing the whole world. Jesus wants us to influence our part of the world. There's a saltiness to our faith. There is a reflective property to our life with God. Think about it. When I say "Jesus loves me," the salty part of that is meant to enhance or preserve my relationships with others. If Jesus loves me and I withhold that love from another it's like salt becoming useless. The challenge is to shake out our faith on every aspect of our lives and then to be aware of the impact that makes. Jesus says there's a shining quality to our faith. The light God gives isn't just to show me my way. What God is doing in me always reflects beyond me. If I claim that God is illuminating my life then others have to see that, too. The transformation of the world begins with the world that is immediately around us. We've got to consider the question, "What difference does my faith make in who I am, and in what I do or say?"

This past week one senator, Mitt Romney, stirred up quite a political firestorm when his vote at the end of the impeachment trial went differently than his colleagues. Romney said he acted because of his faith. I hesitate to mention this today because it's hard not to hear this in a political context. But, it's the faith context that is relevant for our purposes this morning. This is an example of how one man's decision was influenced not by his relationship with a group of politicians but by his relationship with God. Let's leave the rightness or wrongness of Romney's vote to others. The point is, his faith matters to him. Jesus says we are salt and light. He didn't say we might be these things. He didn't say we have the potential to be salt and light if everything lines up just right. Jesus says we are salt and light, and he wants us to realize that our relationship with God has the power to enhance and illuminate this moment and what is happening now.

There is some evidence, as we follow the gospel story after Jesus' sermon on the hillside, that the people forgot who they were. We struggle with that, too. And so, here's our task this week. Remember who Jesus has said we are. This week we carry these questions with us because this is the kind of thing salt and light people do. "How does my relationship with God impact my decisions? Where do I stand because I've chosen to stand close to Christ? Who am I because of who he is? What is God making of us and what does God need from us today?" How we answer these questions will determine who we will be as God's people in the world.