

**Sermon for February 5, 2016 (Epiphany 5, Year A)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Psalm 112:1-10; Matthew 5:13-20

Title: Our Identity in Christ

“You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13,14,16).

My sisters and brothers: who are you? Who do you understand yourself to be?  
What is your core identity?

You know, it is just possible that there is nothing more important for all of us to consider and about which to gain clarity.

I am certain that most of you have heard me say this before:

There is no such thing as “Christianity”.

That idea is a myth. It’s a fallacy. It’s “fake news” used for the sake of convenience.

There is no such thing as Christianity. What there IS, is the Church.

Unfortunately, our English language is quite deficient in helping to understand this. In the Greek, the “you” of this Gospel text is plural. And this is the norm throughout all of the Gospels.

“You PLURAL are the salt of the earth...You PLURAL are the light of the world.”

The Lord never speaks to private individuals in this way. And this distinction is crucially important!

You cannot be the salt of the earth and the light of the world all by yourself.

This identity comes through connection with the living Word of God, with the living energy of God.

It comes through relationship with Jesus who is himself the Light of the world.

The false concept of “Christianity” gives the sense of a set of ideas to which one can mentally assent and thereby claim that identity.

This is how politics often works. A person hears someone speak about conservative principles, or about the struggle of the working class, and one can say, yes, I agree with those ideas and therefore, I am a conservative – or a socialist – or whatever set of ideas is being espoused.

That identity is self-determined. I agree with these ideas, therefore I determine that I am X or Y – whatever label one feels like using.

It’s the same with sports. Lots of people have jumped on the Patriots bandwagon over the last 16 years, because it’s easy to do! It’s self-determined. You just say it: “I am a Patriots fan!”

Though that is NOT something you will EVER hear my say, let’s be clear about that!

This is how most of our identities work in society today. We claim them for ourselves. They are self-determined.

But this cannot work when it comes to marriage, right? Or can it?

Well, did you know that there is a growing movement now in support of self-marriage? I mean, to become married... to yourself!

Just go the website [www.imarriedme.com](http://www.imarriedme.com) and you can buy your kit. It’s only \$50 if you want to give yourself a sterling silver ring. \$230 if yourself-spouse prefers to receive a gold ring! And the kit comes with ceremony instructions, a set of vows to recite to yourself, plus a set of 24 affirmation cards to read to yourself as a way of reinforcing those vows.

This kit is one part of a new practice called sologamy.

Did you catch that? SOLOGAMY!

In fact, you can work with a Japanese travel agency to arrange a “Solo Wedding” trip, with all the fixings of a modern wedding – picking out your dress (since it is primarily women who are doing this), choosing your cake, staying in a nice hotel. Sounds like fun, right? All by yourself.

Now, listen: we ought to be concerned for all of those folks who are so lonely and depressed that they need to go through this kind of ceremony in order to feel better about themselves.

That's not a good place to be, and whatever helps them to have some more joy in life, it must not be a bad thing.

But let's be real: you cannot self-determine your state in life as married. You cannot marry yourself and then use the Married Filing Jointly status on your tax return! It doesn't work that way!

A person cannot self-determine relationships. You cannot make yourself into a married person, no matter how hard you try! A relationship with another human being is an unassailable requirement.

In the same exact way, you cannot make yourself a Christian. You cannot self-determine this identity! It is given to you. It comes through a relationship with Jesus and with the Body of Christ. Relationships with other human beings are an unassailable requirement.

There is no such thing as Christianity as some kind of flag you can wave or a bumper sticker that you can display to claim your identity. It does not exist.

But what there IS, is the church. Real people. Actual people. Flesh and blood people! You cannot baptize yourself! It must come through a relationship with others, with an actual community of people.

For the next month, we will be reading through the Sermon on the Mount. In this masterful teaching, the Lord Jesus names the identity of the disciples, his students, those who will learn from him and imitate his manner of life.

It began with the Beatitude, and here their new community identity is clarified. What they are to do is make clear.

"You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others"

There is no qualification. No IF, AND, or BUT. Simply, this is who you are.

However, there is a warning! The Lord clearly communicates a risk in failing to live into our identity.

Salt that loses its flavor. Light that is hidden.

Our identity as the Christ-community is not self-determined. It is given to us, but it is one which we must work out through our choices and actions.

We must become who we are. Become who you are.

That is what Jesus is after in this text, and throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

To have righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is not achieved by being more sanctimonious. It is not achieved by trying harder than everyone else. It is achieved by becoming who you really are.

My friends, identity always comes first. Ideas and actions flow from identity.

This is SO crucially important. It is basic human nature!

We think and we act as people on the basis of who we understand ourselves to be. On the foundation of our core identity.

And people choose to live and to die for the sake of their core identity.

Now, this is where things get complicated!

In reality, we are many things. We have many identities, and there are many competing narratives that will explain yourself to you.

Our Lord Jesus calls to us, claims us as his Body, and says: Become Who You Are.

But I was dismayed when I recently found this exact phrase used in a slick promotional video from the National Policy Institute.

That might sound like yet another think-tank down in DC, but the National Policy Institute is actually one of the many new white supremacy groups which have recently become popular.

And in this slick video, they reach out to young millennials who feel rootless, without any foundation on which to stand, and they call upon all White people of European descent to rise up and “become who you are”.

This makes my stomach turn, but the truth is that there are many different ways to understand your core identity. And many different voices crying out to you right now demanding that you think of THIS or THAT as your core identity.

And we live each day in a swirl of differing ideas and competing narratives.

But in the Gospel – in the Holy Gospel, the Lord Jesus offers us a deep core identity which is constructed not on the basis of biology, not on the basis of nationality or economics, not on the basis of principles or ideas, not on the basis of what you have accomplished – or even on the basis of who you have married, but simply on the basis of relationship with him!

The Lord calls you to understand your core identity on the basis of God’s claim on your life. YOU belong to God. That’s why you are here this morning!

When we baptize people and anoint them with oil, we say,  
“Nathan, Jennifer, Hannah, Mark, Jonathan, Roberta...you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Marked as Christ’s own forever! THIS is who we are, together, as the church.  
To understand and to grasp this is the mind of Christ.

Now, my friends, let us become who we are.  
The salt of the earth and the light of the world and the Body of Christ. Amen.