

*Sermon for St Paul's Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA
Year A, Epiphany 5 (February 9, 2020, 7:45AM and 9:00AM Holy Eucharists)*

Be who you are called to be.

I speak to you in the Name of One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

There is a question we have all faced or have asked at some point in our lives. What do you want to be when you grow up? With high school and college graduations coming soon, it might be a question on a lot of peoples' minds. We might have given – or heard – many different answers: lawyer, fireman, astronaut, construction worker, professional athlete...priest! I once wanted to be a doctor when I started college – then I took organic chemistry and biochemistry! I decided on a different vocation. These courses were the second leading cause of economics majors at my college!

Some may still be getting that question today, no matter how old they are! I know I heard it during my last few years in the Army. It was a tongue-in-cheek question my friends and colleagues and I used to enter into conversation about what we wanted to do after our time in the Army – or when we have to “grow up.” Some had definite plans, others were still trying to figure it out. Some things don't change from college.

I think the deeper, more searching question I asked myself during this time was: Who am I without the Army? I started to think about this question after reading a book which advised determining who you are without the status, rank, job title, and uniform because, one day, you will no longer be in the Army. Who you are will carry you beyond the loss of that identity into whatever you do when you “grow up.” I think this also may apply to other professions or occupations or pursuits.

I started to list the things I thought described me. I am a son, a brother, and uncle, a friend, and a now retired Army officer. But, what I began to realize is that the center of my identity had shifted from being an Army Officer who is also these other things to being a Christian who is also these other things. Sure, I am still a son, brother, uncle, and friend, and retired Army officer. But being a Christian – however imperfectly – transcends all of those other identities and past, present, or future vocations.

And this I think is what Jesus is teaching the multitudes gathered at the mountain that day: you are called to something new, something that transcends your old identities. He is calling them to be disciples.

A little context may help. At this point in Matthew's Gospel and the Epiphany story, Jesus has been born, the Magi have followed the star to see the infant Jesus, Jesus has been baptized, and now, after being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus has called his first disciples and began his Galilean ministry of teaching and healing. As the crowds gather, Jesus goes up the mountain and delivers the Sermon on the Mount, starting with the Matthew's version of the Beatitudes.

If I can borrow Reverend Frank Wade's term here, and “frack” this story a bit, I think the multitudes gathered that day were many things: parents, homemakers, fishermen, tax collectors,

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laborers, etc. They were young and old. They may have heard about Jesus, or just came to hear this man preach out of curiosity. They are a lot like us, or rather, we are a lot like them.

Using the metaphors of salt and light, he tells them, as disciples, they have taken on a new identity, a new mission. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his work *The Cost of Discipleship*, Jesus does not say you will become or will be given salt and light, but tells the crowds you *are* these things because I have called you.¹ Or, as author Charles H. Talbert writes, Jesus says “I have made you into something, now be it.”²

This new “it” -- discipleship -- comes with obligations.

Being a disciple or follower of Christ means living in the world for the betterment and benefit of the world. As Bonhoeffer writes, we cannot just think of heaven, but also our earthly tasks as well.³ Disciples are a visible community made so by our actions.⁴ As today’s Gospel tells us: “...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).” Discipleship is a way of life.

Jesus tells us this through the metaphors of the city on a hill and the lamp on a stand. I can picture the nodding heads in the crowds as Jesus says a city on a hill cannot be hid. He is right, it cannot. Just look at Jerusalem. Or the incredulous reactions to the absurd notion of lighting a lamp then hiding it under a bushel basket – who would do that, right? No one, of course! I think back to last Sunday when our children’s choir sang “This Little Light of Mine” – hide it under a bushel – NO! I’m going to let it shine!

Despite being called, we are faced with a choice. We can decide to hide the light of Christ that is in us as disciples by placing it under a metaphorical bushel. Bonhoeffer calls the bushel conforming to the world or denying our call.⁵ Commentators note that salt loses its function and value when it is mixed with impurities. We can choose to hide the light of Christ from the rest of the world. We can choose to be something different than who we are called to be.

Jesus is calling us to be a light to the world in whatever vocation or occupation we are in. Notice, that Jesus does not list a series of jobs or vocations that are approved as light-giving, though there are some obviously wrong choices. Rather, Jesus gives us qualities and actions that transcend occupations and vocations. We should live out the Beatitudes in our lives. We should help those in need. We should love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. The text from Isaiah even tells us God’s light will shine when we feed the hungry, free the oppressed, open our homes to the homeless, and cloth the naked (Isaiah 58:6-8).”

This is what Jesus calls us to do. We should be who we are called to be. Whether you are a priest or a parent, student or teacher, you can shine light into your parish or home or corner of the world. In a few minutes, we will hear in the Preface to Holy Communion for Epiphany that we have received the new light of Christ in our hearts. Should you hide it under a bushel? No! We should let it shine as a light in the world to the glory of God. *Amen.*

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¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 116-17.

² Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 56.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 116.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 117.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 118.