



Do What you Are

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church
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How often have you asked yourselves recently the question, “What in the world should I do?” Perhaps some of you have been asking yourself how to make your way through the increasing noise and turmoil in our nation’s political landscape. Should you post that article on Facebook or not? Should you date that person or not? What is the best way to address the urgent issues around climate change or immigrants in detention? Should you go to that march or shouldn’t you? Should you downsize or stay in your current house? Should you say something to your dad about his drinking or shouldn’t you? Should you try to reach out across the political divide? How do we determine the answer to difficult questions about what to do?

A long time ago I was feeling some vocational angst. I was a corporate attorney practicing law in the thirty-sixth floor of a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles, and I mean no offense to all the good lawyers there are in this world, but I found the practice of law soul crushing. I could not for the life of me figure out what I should do instead. Then and now, I can admit that I nearly always look for inspiration in books, and in those days one went to the actual bookstore to look for books instead of googling something on the internet. So I went to Barnes and Noble and found this book called *Do what you are*. The whole premise of the book was that we could use our Myers Briggs or Enneagram personality types to pick sustainable, meaningful, life-giving vocations for ourselves. The book said that as long as you are trying to do something that is in conflict with your temperament or your values, you are going to be miserable. Conversely, as soon as you create some alignment between who you are at your core and

what you are doing and saying and expressing in this world, you will experience satisfaction because you will have integrity.

What if, every time we ask ourselves what we should do in any given situation, we are asking the wrong question? What if the first question in any given situation is not, what should I do here? But, who am I in this situation? Who do you want to be in this situation? Who does God call us to be?

Jesus in today's gospel text says something very curious. He says, You are the light of the world. Now if you're really listening to that sentence it should startle you, because it's a pretty radical sentence. Jesus doesn't say that HE is the light of the world. He says, *You* are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.

Light and salt are two simple, ordinary things. They are two things whose being and doing are indistinguishable. Light shines; salt is salty. They are what they do. Light illumines. It brings color and joy and life to the world, to all without distinction. It provides the building blocks for all nourishment in this world through plants who convert light into energy. Light simply shines.

Jesus says, *You are the light of the world*. Jesus is not saying you should try with every molecule of your being to be the light of the world. He is not saying that you *have* the light of the world, or that you *ought to be* the light of the world. It might be tempting to see this text that way; this text shows up toward the beginning of a famous passage called the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus makes some outrageous demands of his followers. In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus says that not only may you not commit adultery, but you can't even look at someone with lust in your heart. Not only must you not commit murder, but you must not even call someone a fool. At the end of today's text he says, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That's like saying unless you're more generous and

pious than Mother Theresa you'll never be good enough. So Jesus is making all these outrageous demands of his followers—demands that, if we are honest, we will admit are simply impossible to follow. And next to these difficult demands, he simply says that we *are* the light of the world. What are we to make of this?

According to a Jewish rabbi named Alan Ullman that I studied with a few years ago, in the scriptures, the earlier a word or a person or an idea shows up, the more important it is in understanding the themes of the whole. Listen to the very first words of the very first book of the Bible. In Genesis 1, it says this:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was a formless void, and there was darkness over the deep. And the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.¹

From the very beginning of our scriptures, we understand God as a constantly creating force who is always speaking things into being. God is making things new through speech, through words. And the very first thing God makes is light, before the sun and moon and stars are created on day four. Light, in the cosmos God creates, is essential, and it means something more than the physical light that comes from sun and moon.

When Jesus says to his disciples, you are the light of the world, he is not just describing something. Instead, like God did at the very beginning of creation, Jesus in the very act of speaking these words is creating the light which illuminates us and which is meant, not for our personal enjoyment or satisfaction, but for the life of the world God so loves.

Let me say this again. Jesus is not saying you should be the light. He is not saying you should try harder to be the light. He is not saying you have the light. He is saying you are the light of the world. A light that can't help

¹ Genesis 1:1-3

being what it is. And in the very act of saying that this is what we are, he is creating the light in us as he speaks. He is speaking into being in us the capacity to reveal the truth, to illuminate what actually is, for the sake of love and fulfilling the purposes of God. We as the light of the world are not the light for our personal enjoyment. To be light is an inherently public vocation. And revealing the truth is for the sake of God's purpose, which is not to accuse or to condemn or to get revenge or to hate, but to make everything whole.

Mahatma Gandhi, as you know, was an extraordinary Hindu monk from India who founded a movement he called "*satyagraha*" whose purpose, he said, was "to replace methods of violence and [to be] a movement based entirely upon truth." Gandhi subtitled his autobiography "the Story of my Experiments with Truth." Gandhi's personal journey of self-realization merged with his efforts to achieve Indian independence from the British "without the fanaticism, the hatred, and the slaughter that attend so many violent struggles."² For Gandhi, non-violence was about seeing the truth of God clearly behind the oppression of the British Empire in his country, and using the truth to actively and nonviolently resist that oppression until his people could be free.

Although Gandhi was operating within a different religious system, his teachings and Jesus' teachings about truth and nonviolence had parallels. Light reveals the truth. Light simply shows what is, nonviolently, with love. In the era of fake news, and in an era of increasing autocracy, that's a pretty significant vocation for us. Now I'm guessing that when I asked you earlier if any of you had "what should I do" in mind, some of you were thinking about today's political situation and today's climate crisis, and how to stay sane and be a positive force in this world. What I want to ask you to consider again, before you ask yourselves what you should do, is to ask yourself who God invites us to be in Christ. Our identity is as the light of

² See Sissela Bok, foreword to Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Beacon Press, 1993) at xiii-xiv.

the world. It's equally as much about who we are as about what we do. And Light reveals the truth for the sake of love and healing and wholeness.

Part of our function as light is to reveal the ugly side of what is, but that is not the same thing as judging, condemning, and hating. Jesus, in this same chapter of Matthew's gospel, says that we are to love our enemies and to pray for those who are persecuting us. Light brings joy and clarity. Light helps us wake from sleep. Light is beautiful. The impact of our presence in the world is similar when we do not try to hide who and what we are.

When you get caught up in ambiguity and overwhelm and wondering what you should do or ought to do in face of the turmoil going around us nationally and globally or in your life personally, try detaching from all that turmoil and simply sitting with Jesus saying to you, You are the light of the world. We are the light of the world. Allow the words of Jesus to create the reality they describe. Realize Jesus is not saying you need to grit your teeth and try harder. He is saying, stop hiding who you truly are. You are made to face the truth of what is happening, in the light of God's love and God's purposes for healing in this world. He is saying that no matter where you are at or what you are experiencing, God can make something new within us, and that newness can bring light and healing and liberation to us and to everything and everyone around us. We do not need to be stuck. We can be given freedom and purpose by the living Christ who, in the power of God the Creator, is always making everything new. We are the light of the world. Amen.