

One of the developments in our modern digital world is the prevalence of identity theft. Many of us have dealt with this. Thieves get a hold of our credit card information. Our email addresses get hacked. I'm guessing many of us have received an email from someone familiar to us saying they're traveling. Their wallet went missing. Can you send a few hundred dollars?

It's a thing now that people will hack a pastor's email address. Posing as the pastor, they send out emails to parishioners asking them for money or gift cards in order to help someone in need. Let me take this opportunity to tell you, I will never email you for money. That's a conversation, not an email. If I ever email you for money, just hit "delete."

This morning, I want to talk with you about something I consider another form of identity theft. I'm talking about when we're robbed of our identity as children of God. As children of God, each one of us is a beloved and beautiful and unique and valued creature. I believe there are forces in our world that want to rob us of our blessedness and belovedness and uniqueness -- those things that mark us as beings created in the image of God.

We see this with kids. When kids are young, they're full of wonder. They want to explore everything. They take risks. When something amuses a toddler, they laugh with everything they have. They don't hold back. They're not self-conscious. Young kids freely express their love. Mommy, I love you. Daddy, I love you so much. They're not afraid to cry. They express themselves openly.

Then, life happens. They learn that children should be seen and not heard. Boys learn that real men don't show weakness or express emotions. Girls learn they're welcome in certain spaces, but not others. We become risk averse. We receive messages that we're not good enough, or wealthy enough, or thin enough. We all know that if we hear something enough times, we begin to believe it. I call that identity theft. We get robbed of our self-esteem, our confidence, and those things that make us unique.

Many of us are old enough to remember comedian Al Franken's character on Saturday Night Live: Stuart Smalley. Do you remember this? His character had a show called "Daily Affirmations with Stuart Smalley."

He would begin the show by looking in a mirror and saying, "I'm going to do a terrific show today. And I'm going to help people. Because I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And doggone it, people like me." Say what you want about Stuart Smalley, but that was a man who would not let anyone or anything steal his identity.

Today, we read from the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus went up the mountain with his followers and taught them. It begins with the Beatitudes in which he says, Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the peacemakers...

The last of the Beatitudes says this: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” I think Jesus was describing identity theft. Blessed are you when people try to rob you of your identity as my follower. Blessed are you when the world tries to diminish you and rob you of your identity as a beloved child of God.

Any time we find ourselves silenced because of our age, ignored because of our gender, demeaned for our religious views, excluded because of our physical limitations, shamed for our sexual orientation, marginalized because of our mental health, that is identity theft.

I like to mention this occasionally. The region of Galilee was considered the outskirts. Galilee was a land of humble farmers and fishermen. They spoke with a particular accent that led others to consider Galileans “country bumpkins.” In fact, in John’s Gospel, when someone suggested Jesus was the Messiah, someone else responded, “How can the Messiah come from Galilee?”

These were the people gathered around Jesus as he preached. After saying, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account,” he reminded them of their true identity. He said, “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”

Notice, Jesus did not say strive to be salt and light. He did not say someday you might be salt and light. He said you ARE salt and light, just as you are. It’s not something you seek or achieve. That’s how God made you. That is your God given identity.

Then, he said don’t let anyone steal your saltiness. Don’t let anyone take from you your distinctive flavor. You are light. Don’t let the world convince you that your light isn’t important and valuable and worthy of shining for all to see. Don’t hide your light, because you’ve been conditioned to believe nobody needs it.

I think of the familiar words of Marianne Williamson: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” She writes, “We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.”

I believe God created each of us salt and light for a reason. The world needs salt. The oceans are full of salt. Our bodies need salt to survive. Salt makes things good. If any of us sit down to a casserole or a soup that’s a bit bland, chances are adding salt will make it pretty darn tasty.

I often hear people say they think the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Depending on what poll you read, 75-85% of Americans think the country is going in the wrong direction. If we are the salt of the earth, that means God is depending on us to make things better. That’s what salt does. You are the salt in your family, your neighborhood, your school.

Light is essential for life to flourish. Light allows us to see. It reveals both the beauty of the world and also its corruption. As the light of the world, God is depending on us to illuminate the path for others,

to serve as a guide, to reveal that which is hidden. Joseph Pulitzer said, "There is not a crime, there is not a dodge, there is not a trick, there is not a swindle, there is not a vice which does not live by secrecy."

You are the light of the world. Don't hide it. A candle goes on a stand where it can illuminate the whole room. Let your little light shine for others to see. By seeing your good works, other folks will give glory to God in heaven.

I give God glory all the time. When I clap after the choir performs an amazing anthem, I'm praising God for the beautiful thing I just witnessed. When I see folk give so generously at our monthly food collections, I thank God. When someone shares with me some good deed they performed for their neighbor, even a small gesture of kindness, I think, "Hallelujah! Thank God for small acts of kindness."

The point Jesus made to his followers was that they were salt and light. God made you salt and light, because that's what the world needs. Don't let anyone rob you of your saltiness. Don't hide your light. That's our calling. Our task is to protect our God-given identity. So, how do we do that?

One way we protect ourselves from identity theft is by celebrating Communion. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." However, when we break bread and share the cup, we don't just remember who Jesus is, we remember who we are. We claim our identity as followers of Christ.

Coincidentally, or maybe not, one of the ingredients in bread is salt. And what it is that allows grapes to ripen on the vine? Light. Salt and light - maybe we are what we eat. The sacrament of communion is identity theft protection.

Lastly, as goofy as Stuart Smalley's daily affirmations were, I think he was on to something. Wouldn't it be helpful to have a daily affirmation as protection from identity theft, a little reminder of our identity as children of God? In that vein, I made up a little daily affirmation of my own. It goes like this:

Today I'll remember I'm both salt and light, though it's not always easy to do.
I give this world flavor. I offer my light. If I don't do it, then who?

Some will say I'm not good enough, their judgement could make me feel small.
Shame on me, if I believe it. I'm answering to a higher call.

I'm going to put myself out there, leave my doubt and fear on the shelf.
I'll risk disappointing others, in order to be true to myself.

So, if you're with me, brothers and sisters, go forth and fight the good fight.
And never forget what Jesus said. You are the salt of the earth, and its light.