

“Let Your Light Shine”

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Matthew 5:13-20

It is both a blessing and a mandate. Jesus is preaching and teaching, what we call now the Sermon on the Mount. He has just laid out for his growing community of followers a series of blessings, Beatitudes, counter-cultural affirmations of the risk-taking, convention-defying nature of this journey. These are iconic words, and they are also revolutionary.

But Jesus is not done. I can image the congregation hearing all of this, and being challenged by it, and inspired by it, but also being somewhat wary. This all sounds well and good, Jesus. We don't need a guarantee, or even a promise, but we do need some kind of indication that we have the capacity to live this life, the potential to live into the vision, your vision.

So it is both a blessing and a mandate, what comes next, in words equally iconic and revolutionary. “You are the salt of the earth,” he tells them. “You are the light of the world.” Salt and light.

We could spend a lifetime exploring the implications of each. I am not sure we fully understand the “salt” imagery in the low sodium world of 2020, where food is easily preserved, but it was powerful. Salt as seasoning, yes, to give taste and texture to food. And salt as preserver, to keep food safe longer, salt that has an important function, that, if not used, becomes worthless. Salt that was of high financial value, often given as a gift.

So part of the mandate and blessing becomes turning our faith into action, hearing those beatitudes and doing something about them, that they become more than platitudes, lovely words, but calls to action. You are the salt of the earth. It is a declaration for clarity, not a suggestion of possibility. You. Are. So be it.

You are the light of the world. Jesus makes a reference to a city on a hill – I don't know if he had Chestnut Hill in mind. Then he tells a little joke about lighting a candle and then hiding it. Of course we wouldn't do it. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine.

John Brokhoff writes that there are four things that light can do.

*>Light is radiant.*

A light is best when it directs our attention to something else, a spotlight, a work of art or a pathway. It glows and reflects and directs. How can we be radiant light? How can we be light to someone who is searching, grieving, questioning, not to provide answers so much, but to provide a presence that radiates light and love.

*>Light is insight into the meaning of life.*

Centuries ago, an English minister coming to America minister named John Robinson said that God has yet more light to bring into the world. That is to say, God is not done teaching us. We have more to learn, more to understand, by God's grace. That's why we pray a prayer of illumination every Sunday, to seek the Spirit's light of insight. "More light," Robinson's term, was co-opted by Presbyterians in the last several decades to help us understand that God had more light to offer us as we think about matters of faith and human sexuality, who may be ordained and who may be married. Light brings insight. More light brings more insight.

*>Light is hope in a despairing world.*

Our family likes lighthouses. We have driven miles and miles off the beaten path to find a lighthouse. Think about a sailor who is lost, or anyone who is lost, physically or spiritually. Think how we can be as lighthouses to them, providing hope, a sense of direction, a beacon in the darkness.

*>Light is service in terms of good works.*

When we tutor, or teach, or serve a meal, or coach, when we share our time on behalf of someone else, our light radiates to where there is need.

As we gather as a congregation in a few minutes for our annual meeting and reflect on where God might be calling us, this is an important venue for shining our light. How do we deepen these services we are providing, how do we broaden opportunities, and levels of participation?

How do images of light help us understand all of this? How do we draw attention to complex problems? Poverty? Gun violence? Racism? How do we illuminate difficult questions that are more easily avoided? How do we suggest options that others have dismissed? How do we comprehend, first ourselves, and then help others to comprehend? How do we bring light to where God's blessed and beloved children are hurting and make a difference?

We will, of course, spend time at the annual meeting looking at numbers, dollars and cents, bricks and mortar. That matters. And when we gather on Thursday for the speaker series presentation, I will talk about broader church trends that, at least statistically, are not always

encouraging. And as much as budgets matter, and fiscal prudence, Jesus is calling and blessing us into so much more than keeping the lights on.

We are called to be like a beacon for a wayward traveler that provides guidance and direction. Like a lamp shining in a dark place, providing illumination, and by so illuminating you and me, reflecting off of our faces into a world in need, a broken and fearful world that needs this light as much as it ever has. We are to be for each other – and all who enter – whatever dark night you or they are experiencing, light, not the cheap and easy light of casual spirituality and cultural comfort, but rather the true light of incarnation and epiphany and transfiguration.

I know winters are different here than in Western New York, but I do wonder if and when winter will come, though it has been plenty gray. Janet Hunt writes that “Without a doubt, the darkness within its compounded by the darkness outside. And so, with all of this and more, it is so that I am yearning for ‘light.’” Hunt writes: “Only this is not the light that shines from the sky. No, this is not even the light I seem to increasingly need to decipher a recipe or to read a novel. No, this is the light that comes from within — the kind that shines through individual people and whole communities of people...” And while we, the church, need comfort and warmth that light can provide, Hunt affirms that “While the light of Christ can’t help but warm us, too, it is always meant for the ‘other.’ It is always meant for the world.” Then Hunt asks “Where have you seen light, lately? How have you been light and how has that light been reflected back to you? And how are you called to be light tomorrow?”

Alyce McKenzie reminds us that this is not a new calling. “Israel had long regarded God as the source of light for daily life and light itself. Israel was to be a light to the nations through redemptive servanthood.” For McKenzie, that means we are light for the whole world, that gives glory to God and not ourselves. We become blessed as we share that light, light that reflects back to us and on us as our connection with God deepens.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during World War II, a leader in the Confessing Church that challenged Hitler and the perverted notion that Nazism was somehow based on Christian principles. Niemoller preached a sermon in 1936 just before being arrested, about the “...picture which the Lord Jesus Christ holds up to us: ‘Ye are the light of the world’: we hear these words,” Niemoller preached, “and are reminded by them that we worry about something that ceases to exist in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. What are we worrying about? It is not your business to worry about whether the light is extinguished or not by the (wind.)’ We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is His concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away”

*We are only to see that the light is not hidden away.* In the face of wind or rain or anything else, we are only to see that the light is not hidden away. Illuminating Nazism might be an extreme.

It may not. What I do know is that we have been blessed with a counter-cultural blessing that gives us the only credential that we will ever need. We needn't manufacture the light. God does that. We needn't look for opportunities. God provides those. We simply need to be, to live into the vision and vocation of who God calls us to be. It's not "you *could* be light if you just tried." It's not "you might be light if you only did this or that." What we believe is that we ARE light, that Jesus calls us to be light, and empowers us to radiate and illuminate and shine. Where that takes us is up to us. That it *will* make a difference – there is no question about it.

"Even the darkness is not dark to you," the Psalmist writes. "The night is as bright as the day." And having experienced that light, can we do nothing else but be, ourselves, as beacons, as shining agents of reconciliation and restoration and hope – and even this church – you, me, all of us, generations past, present, future – as a lamp shining in a dark place.

Which reminds me of a song. Perhaps we can sing it together...

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine." Amen.