

Sermon XXX. 05.  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
5 February 2023

## Light

Isaiah 58:6-9a  
Matthew 5:13-16

*“Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works  
and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*  
Matthew 5:16b (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

Today I suggest to you one of the more meaningful and powerful symbols of faith that we have... It's not a tangible symbol per se...like the Cross...the font or the table... the fish (ho `ichthus)...which also remind us of the person and ministry of Jesus. Yet – just as a symbol points to and represents something greater than itself – *this* representation of the presence of God has been around since...well, the beginning of the world itself.

Jesus once used it to describe himself... And the prophets – like Isaiah and later John the Baptist – spoke of it as testimony... for the redeeming presence of God within those who are righteous and believe. We often speak of **JESUS** – in terms of this symbol – when we gather here at Advent and Christmas – anticipating and celebrating the One who comes and shines in the darkness...

It's **Light** of which I am speaking, of course. Jesus, the **Light of the world**... 'the light (that) shines in the darkness – as John says – and the darkness did not overcome it.'<sup>2</sup> So simple, it is...and yet, so profound.

It's a leading reason why candles are lit in the sanctuary as we worship, on the Lord's Day, and at other times.

I would even suggest that all of our worship – at home or at church – should include the lighting of a candle – simply to remind us of the presence and nearness of God.

## I

**Yet, our lessons** – for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany...a time in the Church year when we recall the **Light of Christ** that we bear... These lessons – from Isaiah and from the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ in Matthew – both point to *another* who bears this light. **You** are that other...the bearer of the light. Yes...**you**...(collectively and individually)...**bear the light of God.**

Referring to the good that those who follow God can bring...in

*sharing our food with the hungry,  
taking the homeless into our homes,  
clothing the naked, and  
never evading a duty to our kin...*

If you **do** that sort of thing...(says Isaiah)...living and ministering to those who live around us in great need...

‘Then your light will break forth like the dawn, (he says)  
and new skin will speedily grow over your wound;  
your righteousness will be your vanguard  
and the glory of the LORD YOUR rearguard.’<sup>3</sup>

**You are light** – don’t you see – when you remember and care for those in need around you. Even amidst the problems – the wounds – that you may have in your life...*there still remain* others for whom you may minister...bearing the light of God within you.

In fact, in some cases, you may be the **only light of Christ that someone sees.**<sup>4</sup>

## II

**There is much** that Jesus tells his disciples – and all those who hear – in the instructions he gives on a Galilean mountainside. These lessons were likely taught by Jesus throughout his ministry... Yet Matthew compiles them in this three-chapter section near the beginning of his gospel.

So rich are these eight verses (5:13-20) – that immediately follow the ‘Beatitudes’...

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit...

‘Blessed are those who mourn...

'Blessed are the meek...' <sup>5</sup> and so forth...

So *chock-full* are they that whole sermons – have been – and shall be written on teachings like...

'You are the *salt* of the earth...' *What does that mean?*

But those are sermons for *another* day.

The teaching of Jesus that I hope for us to remember today is...

'You are *the light of the world*. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it give light to the whole house.'<sup>6</sup>

Once more, Jesus turns the theological tables on us.

Jesus – 'the great *delegator*' – has done it again!

**So often** we think of – and correctly refer to – Jesus as 'the Light of the world' ...

drawing that understanding from the Fourth Gospel...both from the Prologue (as I have mentioned)...and from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of John where Jesus says...

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life."<sup>7</sup>

But *that was another time*...another gospel...written some years after Matthew set down these words for the struggling Church in Antioch (in Syria).

In Matthew Jesus says "*You are the light of the world.*" He turns the tables – so to speak – for here Jesus is placing greater responsibility **on us** who follow.

*And what is that responsibility* we have – as light-bearers in the world? **Live rightly.**

That's a point Jesus makes all through his 'Sermon on the Mount'...we need to live by and **do what is right.**

And what makes that assignment so **tough**...as the prophet Micah reminds us ... "...to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God..." **is that** it is not always easy

for us to pin-down or determine 'what is right.' But, prayerfully, that's what we are called to do.

If you would just take a few minutes to *read the three chapters* that follow these words of Jesus – in the **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5, 6 and 7) – You might have a pretty clear picture of what Jesus reveals to us concerning 'what is right' – the way God would have us live and serve as his people... On matters of anger and murder...on lust and adultery... on divorce ...on loving your neighbor...

Yet the trouble is... we – like most Presbyterians... We – like most Christians, in fact... would rather *pick and choose* what we think is right...and fall way-short of what Jesus reveals as the righteousness of God. It's **not** about you – what you think. It's **about God** – how **God** shows us in the way we are to treat our fellow human beings.

### III

So **what do we do**...if we take to heart the word of commission that Jesus gives to any of us who would claim (or simply to seek) to be his disciples this day? We need, quite simply, to be **bearers of the light** which Jesus brings...

Not *judges* over other peoples' behavior...

Not *enforcers* – as some self-appointed members of the 'God Squad'...

But simply **bearers of the light** as shown in Jesus Christ.

*We need to let the light of Christ shine through us...for us...among us...to the glory of God above us.*

And we need to **stop hiding our light under a bushel basket!** You are here – in this world – in this *church*...for a reason. God has chosen you...has shined his light upon you ...for a reason and a purpose. *And do you even know* what that purpose is? It is – quite simply – to shine your light in such a way...that others may see the goodness and the glory of God.



Don't you ever sell yourself short! God *made* you. God *chose* you and *called* you.

And God does *not* do shoddy work!

Will Willimon remembers the time – growing up in the Church – when he first had a male Sunday School teacher. He was in high school...and when Sunday School commenced that fall his class was introduced to this fellow.. And *what a teacher* he turned out to be.

He was not like the other teachers Willimon had had... He was a businessman. He admitted – almost from the beginning – that he wasn't well-versed in the Scriptures. He even asked the class to help him in that regard.

But *what he would do* was talk to these young people about some of the challenges he faced in his work. Sometimes he would outline an important decision he would have to make on Monday morning...and then would ask the class what he – as a Christian – should do. 'We had never been talked to like adults,' said Willimon... 'or had a teacher who was so honest about his limitations.'

Well, as Providence would have it...years later Willimon was invited back to his home church to preach... And he saw the man who was his teacher...and told him, 'I'll always remember your Sunday School Class.'

'I'll never forget it either,' said the man...

'What do you *mean*?' asked Willimon,

'I hated those two years,' he said. 'I told the preacher that I had *zero* skills in teaching kids... that I wasn't that good with the Bible. But he forced me to do it. Said I owed him a favor. And you kids! All you wanted to do was giggle and hold hands and it was...*awful*.' He *never knew* how good he was!

Willimon said that exchange taught him something important.

"Sometimes the best things we do for God are the things we don't want to do. Sometimes God asks us to do things that are indeed pleasant to us. But sometimes we work for God, not from what we want, but because we believe this is what God wants."<sup>8</sup>

**You and I** are given a work to do. That work – quite simply – is to bear the light of Christ.

“You are the light of the world...” says Jesus. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”<sup>9</sup>

### Shine on!

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> John 1:5b, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible – New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.125 NT.

<sup>3</sup> From Isaiah 58:7, 8, *The Revised English Bible – with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 642.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Willimon, ‘*Salt and Light*,’ *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Year A (January, February, March 2014), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> From Matthew 5:3, 4, 5, *New Oxford*, p. 6 NT.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:14-15, italic emphasis, mine.

<sup>7</sup> John 8:12b.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Willimon, pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5:14a, 16b.