

"Being Light For the World"
Matthew 5:14-16

February 9, 2020

5th Sunday After the Epiphany

"This little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine." Recognize that song? It's a song many of us have known since we were children. It's based on our Gospel reading where Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others." Have you ever stopped to think just exactly what light this is that we are supposed to shine before others to such a degree that they will glorify, not us, but our Father in heaven?

Is this light our faith? Sometimes the old song is sung as, "This little Gospel light of mine." According to this understanding, we are to show our faith by how we react to adversity. We are to live out our faith by worshiping the Lord and studying the Word of God regularly and often. We are to share our faith by speaking of this Gospel to others, both those outside the church and those within the church.

How's that going for you? Are you reacting to adversity with such a faith that people are impressed? Are you living out your faith by being so totally committed to worship and Bible study as your top priorities that people notice? Are you verbally sharing your faith with others in such a way that they are eager to listen? Are you doing all these things so much and so sincerely that people are praising God for what you are doing?

Maybe our light is not our faith. Maybe Jesus is referring to our good deed. Actions are perhaps more easily seen by those around us. According to this understanding, we are to let our light shine by doing good. We are to be kind to everyone. We are to serve our neighbor unselfishly and without limit. We are to help those in need, both near and far since we are light for the world and not just light for our country, state, town, neighborhood, or family.

How's that going for you? Is your life style attracting notice for its kindness and generosity? Are your acts of kindness and service noticed? Are people giving glory to our Father in heaven for all of your good works?

Maybe we would like this whole business about "letting your light shine" remain just a peppy song for us to enjoy or, perhaps, a nice option for us to follow if we so choose. We can "let" our light shine, but we don't have to if we don't want to. That would certainly be more comfortable for us to do that. However, Jesus does not make that option available to us. The form of the verb "to shine" is that of an imperative – a command. Translating it into English can be difficult, but it goes something like this. When Jesus says, "Let your light shine", He does not mean to "allow" your light to shine. He is commanding that it shine.

How can we possibly do this? The answer is: on our own, we can't possibly do this. By ourselves, we have no light to shine. The Word of God says we are darkness because of sin. Sin is not just what we do. It is who we are. The Word of God goes on to say that, on our own, we dwell in darkness and commit deeds of darkness. We have as much light to shine as a flashlight without batteries. We may look like good light-giving people on the outside, but inside, there is no light.

At least, not before Christ gets ahold of us. He has changed everything. There is really only one light in this dark world of sin. It is not us. It is Him. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12).

We have light only because Jesus, the Light of the world, plunged into the darkness of sin and evil. He was crucified for you and me. Darkness covered the land as He hung on the cross to show that this was no ordinary execution. This was a battle of light vs. darkness, good vs. evil, holiness vs. sin. The Light of the world was covered with the darkness of hell. The holy Son of God was bearing the sin of the world

Jesus did indeed die – the payment for all sin – and rested in the tomb. But, on the third day, came the declaration of His victory. As the sun rose, bright and glorious, on that first Easter morning, it was an indication that light had triumphed over darkness. Death could not hold Jesus. Jesus came back to life and left the tomb in triumph. Good had won over evil. Holiness had blotted out sin. Light had overcome darkness.

Jesus, the Light of the World, had overcome the darkness of sin, death, and hell for you and for me. You and I now share in His light. As the Word of God says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." (Eph. 5:8) Jesus is the one true light. We are light only as we are in Him. Jesus is like the sun, shining with light of its own. We are like the moon, shining only with light from a source outside ourselves. .

So, you ARE the light of the world. And this is not because of who you are or what you have done. It is not because of the theology of your faith or the quality of your actions. It is because of what Jesus has done and whom He has declared you to be. In your baptism, you were connected to Christ, the Light of the world. Because of that, He has said, "You now are the light of the world." You exist in Christ to bring light to a world made dark by sin, evil, and death.

Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others." Your light is Jesus. Therefore, let Jesus shine through you to the world. That relieves the pressure and the stress of it all having to be about you and what you have to do. The reality is that it's all about Him and what He can and will do through you.

How does Jesus shine through you? Is it through your faith or is it through your works? Is it through your words or is it through your actions? Is it by what you say or by what you do? The answer to all of these questions is "Yes!" "Both words and deeds are necessary. Words without deeds will not be heard. Deeds without words will bring no one to praise the Father in heaven." (Gibbs, p. 262)

It's really quite simple. We speak about Jesus and His love. We do things to show Jesus and His love. It's not an "either/or". It's a "both/and". This doesn't mean you have to go off to seminary to become professional church workers. It doesn't mean you have to travel to the ends of the earth, doing good deeds. Your good words and your good works will be said and done in your very ordinary vocations as sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, workers and citizens.

However, these words and works will be very extraordinary in nature. They are to be light in a dark world. They are to be noticeable and draw attention, but not to the words and works themselves or even to you as the speaker or doer of them. Your words and works are to draw attention to the Light, Jesus Christ as the source and reason for what you say and do. Your words and works are to bring praise and glory, not for you, but for our Father in heaven. As one author put it, “Jesus disciples are called to be extraordinary husbands and wives, remarkable neighbors and employees, powerful friends and citizens. Their deeds and their words, in the power of faith and the Spirit will be like...light in the darkness.” (Gibbs, p.262)

Sounds like an overwhelming and daunting task and it would be...if it all depended on you and your skill and strength. But your light is Jesus and, with Jesus, you can say and do these things. The more Jesus you have, the more you are able to let your light shine in what you say and do.

That’s why we assemble here on Sundays and other days. Worship is not just obedience to a command, although it is that. Worship is not just a religious habit or duty, although it is that, too. Worship is primarily where we get more Jesus. Here, we get Him in His Word, read and explained in the lessons and the sermon, so that we are instructed as to what we are to say and what we are to do. Here, we get Jesus in His forgiveness and peace, spoken to us in the Absolution, which encourage us. Here, we even get His body and blood, given and shed for us in His Supper which strengthen us.

As a result of coming here and getting more Jesus through His Word and in the Sacrament, we have more light to shine in our dark world when we leave here. We have more words and knowledge to speak, along with the confidence to speak them. We have more desire and motivation to do good, along with the power to do it.

I invite you to believe two things today. First, believe who Jesus says you are: the light of the world. Despite Satan’s best efforts to accuse you of being the darkest and dirtiest sinner who is incapable of speaking about Jesus or serving others in a meaningful way, you are the light of the world because you are in the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Secondly, believe that you can do what Jesus tells you to do: shine your light before others. Despite the devil’s best efforts to make you believe that you can’t speak of Jesus to others or to tempt you to serve self and not others, you can let your light – Jesus Christ – shine through you and illuminate the darkness around you. He will give you the words to speak. He will provide the opportunities to serve. He will give the strength and the willingness to do good works that will cause people to give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Be who Christ has made you to be. Do what Christ has sent you to do. Be the light by shining the true Light, Jesus Christ, wherever you go, in whatever you do, and with whoever you encounter. Amen.