

Epiphany 5A (2/9/2020)

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Matthew 5:13-20

You are the light of the world. But, do you believe it? It's hard to imagine how your little life, no matter how faithfully lived, can make a significant difference. But, Jesus is speaking to all of us: Together, you are the light of the world. Even the smallest, dimmest light, when joined with all the rest, will light up the night sky.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus applies the term “light of the world” both to himself and to his followers?¹ “I am the light of the world,” he affirms in the Gospel of John, “whoever follows me... will have the light of life.”² But, in our Gospel from Matthew today, he says, “You are the light of the world.... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” It's one thing to look to Jesus as a beacon, God's goodness radiating down through the ages. It's another to think of myself as a source of God's light. **I'm more confident gazing upon the light of Christ than I am shining for others to see.**

But, it's not a command. Jesus doesn't say, *You should become the light of the world*; he declares, *You already are*. It's a fact. The question is: Do you believe it? It's hard to imagine how your little life, no matter how faithfully lived, can make a significant difference in a world beleaguered by so much tragedy.

So, Jesus' pronouncement may seem like a stretch to us, but it's just as remarkable in its original context. Consider his audience for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has caught the attention of people throughout his home region, but there's no reason to believe that he's surrounded by luminaries, so to speak. To quote one

¹ See Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 31ff.

² 8:12.

interpreter: “There are no obvious world-changers gathered around him on the hill. It’s a crowd of ordinary people. Probably a lot of disappointed people. Definitely some desperate people. People who’ve been told they don’t count for much. Scared people.”³ *Kings, prophets, rabbis – these are the light of the world*, Jesus’ first listeners must have thought. *Certainly not us*.

But, **one of the hazards of humility is to underestimate your value and purpose**. If you’re not convinced of your own worthiness and gifts, then you’re not likely to step into the role to which you’re called. Self-effacement turns to passivity; *Oh, I couldn’t possibly* becomes *I won’t*; the lamp that might otherwise give light to the house is concealed under a bushel basket.

Jesus’ response? *For God’s sake, let your light shine*.

Still, your light might feel insignificant – your faith lacking, your resources wanting, your hope waning. But, while we may hear Jesus’ exhortation as if it’s addressed to each of us individually, it’s actually in the second-person-plural: ***Y’all are the light of the world. Let your light shine together, so that others may see the radiant goodness of God. Yes, you, in other words, but not you alone***.

Think of the night sky in midsummer, far from the artificial lights of the city. The brightest star appears at dusk, piercing the sky in one place, yet no single star could ever hope to contend with the obscurity of the universe when the sunlight finally fails. The one star, however, is but a herald of what is to come – a multitude of stars, too numerous to count, spanning from horizon to horizon. Some are more radiant than others, yet even the dimmest stars cluster together, sweeping across the sky like a stream of diamonds.

³ Matt Skinner, “Shine On, You Working Preachers,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5411>.

So, your starlight is faint – your confidence flickering, your sphere of influence limited, your relevance uncertain. **You were never meant to shine on your own, but alongside other lights. Your tiny faith was never meant to stand alone, but to be united with the faith of all your fellow disciples, all so that the world might get a glimpse of the Father’s glory.**

In January, I received a note that I’d like to read to you in its entirety:

I heard you announce that... groups needed to submit reports on how committees were doing for an annual review of sorts.

I’m not a member of Peace, but am a very regular visitor. I work at Spinning Elementary and see firsthand how Peace’s food ministry is helping support families at the school.

I have two children in my class this year (and I had six last year) who receive groceries, and they truly look forward to the food.

I get bags delivered to my classroom, and I discreetly put them in their cubby.

One family came to us in late September, speaking no English. They are hoping to move as soon as they can afford to. They are living with a whole bunch of family members – extended family – in one house. Through Google Translate I’ve learned most of this.

Please know that the food ministry has been a huge help to struggling children in my school. Thank you so much.

Dear church, **you are already the light of the world, whether you believe it or not. If ever you doubt your importance, if you question the strength of your faith and love, consider that even the smallest, dimmest lamp can illuminate someone’s house.**⁴ So, let your light shine together, that others might see it for what it is – a sign of God’s own brilliance, light to chase away shadows, the light that can never be overcome.

⁴ Ronald J Allen, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 335.