

“Light Bearers”
Matthew 5:13-16 – June 26, 2016

INTRO: During Lent this year, our adult study and sermon series were centered on the Beatitudes. Those listings of “blessed” are mainly in the third person, “they and those.” In contrast, today’s reading which follows the Beatitudes is in the second person—addressed to “you.” These are words directed specifically to Jesus’ followers. We aren’t urged to become salt and light, but are defined as being salt and light. Jesus points, not to God or to himself as the light, but to his followers.

There is a TV commercial currently airing, which advertises detergent. It features a children’s choir singing *This Little Light of Mine*. One mother turns to another mother beside her and asks, “which one is yours?” To which the woman replies, “the one in white.” But, here’s the deal. All the kids are dressed uniformly—all are wearing white shirts and beige slacks or skirts. Yet there was a noticeable difference in the whiteness of the shirt the little girl in the front row was wearing. The other mother could pick her out easily. Hence, that shirt obviously was washed with this laundry detergent, which makes the child’s shirt really white—so white you couldn’t miss it. She stood out, and you had best go and get that brand of detergent.

Standing out in a crowd isn’t always comfortable though. After one of my first funerals in West Bend—not long after graduating from seminary, a person came up and asked me in a kind of accusatory tone, “Where are you from?” I said, that I was from West Bend, but had just moved here from Evanston, IL. And I grew up and worked in northern Indiana for the first 30 years of my life. His response was: “Oh, that’s why you talk funny. You sure don’t have a Wisconsin accent.” I guess there was not enough Wisconsin in me yet, to show that I belonged here. My speech patterns, identified me as an outsider, at least in this person’s mind.

When Jesus tells his followers they are “the light of the world,” he’s essentially saying there’s to be enough of the love and light of God in them that it shows—they are to literally stick out in a crowd. Jesus tells his disciples that the light he’s given them, God’s light, God’s love, God’s ways with people—that’s to shine through them. They are to be the vehicle, the way the light continues to be passed along. They are the window through which the light is to be seen.

It would be foolish for Jesus to do his work—for a candle to be lighted and burst into flame, for people to catch onto what he’s about, only to put a basket or a bowl or a bushel over it—so that the light can’t be seen. It would be silly to light a candle, just to hide it. On the contrary, the candle is to be lighted and set in the midst of people—to give light to all that are in the house.

It is said that these verses hold the greatest compliment ever paid to individual Christians, where “Jesus commands the Christian TO BE what he himself claimed to be—the light.” (William Barclay)

Matthew 5:14-15 about being light to the world, are the first verses I remember memorizing as a child. Or at least, they are the first verses I can remember where I had a pretty good idea of what they meant, and they stuck with me. Margaret Belcher was the teacher of our Sunday School class, where we didn’t just memorize the verses, but she did her best to explain the meaning of the words to the class. And that was a gift. It let me know at an early age, that not only were our Bibles important books to read, to not just stack them on a shelf, but that there might just be important ideas and stories to be found there. Don’t ever take lightly what seeds can be planted in a Sunday School class or a Christian Ed setting, which can positively affect a child or young person, and maybe someday even head them off into professional ministry.

So, what do these verses still say to me, a lifetime later? That being a light for the world means that we can’t just blend in with the priorities of the rest of the world around us, or we will have no light to share—there will be nothing distinctive about us. To be the light, we sometimes have to show something different, a view of the realm of God, the reign of God, which others may not yet see. We sometimes have to be ahead of part of the world to do that.

I think back to Pope Francis, a couple months ago, who headed off to the Greek Island of Lesbos, a landing point for hundreds of thousands of refugees & migrants who are trying to reach Europe. And when he boarded his jet to go back to Rome, he brought with him three Syrian refugee families who had lost their homes to bombs—six adults and six children. The reception and care of these families will be borne by the Vatican as they apply for political asylum in Italy. As I read those stories, it seemed a bold move on his part, but a faithful act for one who believes we are account-

able for the compassion or lack of it we show to one another. And a faithful way of showing the light of Christ to the stranger.

When I think back across the years of my ministry, something of becoming light to our world happened at those times when the faith community began to see the people of God in a wider context. In Greenfield, a woman from a nearby group home walked through our door one Sunday, and the following week, she brought with her all of the group home residents. They filled up a long pew in the back. And we became a new version of church.

In Monona, we widened the scope of our congregation by establishing a Spanish-speaking worship service. And whenever we worshiped, served, shared meals together, I always thought that this was a picture of what God's reign might really look like. (And as a side bar, this coming Thursday afternoon, I will be at the courthouse downtown, for the citizenship ceremony of the Spanish-speaking pastor I worked with there, who came to our country from the Dominican Republic, as he becomes US citizen.)

And here in Tosa, we are offering space to the Mary of Magdala congregation, a group of folks who are too far outside the typical Roman Catholic traditions to be able to gain any approval from the diocese, but a group of people who are committed to being church together.

My sense is that whenever we open our minds and our hearts and our doors, we experience a little more of the realm of God. We live in a time when that is not easy. The Brexit vote this past week in Great Britain, and aspects of our own country's political scene, give evidence to me, of a nationalism that can easily tend toward exclusivism. I don't think that's who Jesus means for us to be as the people of the world. More, not less, of the love and grace of God, needs to be seen in our lives. I personally would rather get to the end of my life, and come before my maker and need to confess about being too lenient about showing God's love to the outsider—whether that person is an outsider because of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class, gender, age. I'd rather that be my mistake, than excluding people from God's love and grace.

"The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are." (M. Eugene Boring) It's our responsibility to bring to the world, the light of God, when it comes to justice and injustice.

If we somehow that electing the right political leaders will solve all our world's problems, I think we would do well to think again and instead realize our responsibility in the workings of our country. Bob Edgar, a former US Representative from PA and a UM pastor, once said, "We are the leaders we have been waiting for." We are the ones who need to take greater responsibility for bringing the light of God to our world.

As a faith community, our own ways of relating to one another need to show Christ's light. I think we've learned some things over the years, about working together in better ways. That laity and clergy probably do best working beside each other, that anger and disagreement aren't the best ways for Christians to operate together.

A quote from Ronald Rolheiser, has long been posted above my computer at home "If our creeds are correct, and I believe that they are, we are destined to spend eternity with billions and billions of other people. Worshiping in large groups, (being a part of a church community with a variety of people present, a variety of opinions), is a good way of getting some practice at this."

Over the last eight years we've accomplished a number of projects, things that have needed to be addressed for a long time, concerning our property and buildings. But the continuing challenge is to look at our ministries, and whether those ministries go very far beyond our walls. People can see our church tower at night, and particularly if they are coming over the Harmonie Bridge, they see the cross and flame shining above their heads, but that may not mean much to them. In fact many don't know what that sign symbolizes. But is that the only evidence of Christ's light they see from us? It may be more important that they see in our lives out there, a light that can't be missed.

John Ruskin lived in the days when English villages were lighted by the lamps along the streets. One evening he watched with a friend, as a lamplighter moved slowly down a hill, lighting the lamps along the street. Ruskin said, "There is what I mean by being a real Christian. You can trace the person's course by the lights that they leave burning." Have we, as individuals and as this church, left some lights burning along the way? Probably yes, but there are many more we have yet to light—many more places in this great big world which could use a lot less heat and a lot more light.

Writer Anne Lamott has talked about her faith as something which gives her “a path and a little light to see by. (Her community of faith) follows a brighter light than the glimmer of their own individual candles.”

May that be our experience in this community, and hopefully our years together have left some lights burning along our way.

--Sue Burwell