

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday after Epiphany
February 9, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 58:1-11

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 5:14-17

“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 gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Works and Light

If you **attend church** and worship regularly, then you probably are familiar with at least a few of the phrases from the *Gospel of Matthew* which we just read. Today’s offering from the lectionary, has **Jesus talking** to the disciples and followers in images of **light and darkness** towards the end of the **Sermon on the Mount**. The images he used depicted common elements and experiences for Jesus and his audience. In a clever turn of phrase, he applied them in a deeper way, describing the characteristics of the people who were with him and following him. Those who study literature call this technique he used a **metaphor**: a direct comparison of **unrelated things**. And, it takes some considerable skill to make this work. So, if we believe that the writer of *Matthew* is recording the words of Jesus of Nazareth, then we can safely conclude that he knew how to **tell a story!**

This is not the only place to find a passage like this (*Luke* 14:34-35). And, observers note that all four Gospels depict Jesus doing things in a certain way. But, when Jesus masterfully articulated this message, the **images** and their full meaning worked their way into the conscious thinking of those who heard them then, but also today: The words linger with us. Jesus said,

“You are the light of the world.

Matthew 5:14 NRSV

Jesus used **light** in contrast to **darkness** with a purpose. The followers of Jesus became the light: the same light that was in him. Their **transformation** took place because of Christ and his mission among them and among us today. Once they took on this new “thing,” it was obvious to everyone. It could not be hidden. Like a **city on a hill** at night, it was like a **beacon** for everyone to see.

In creating this remarkable **insight**, Jesus was describing common items found in any household: a **lamp** and lampstand and, most probably, a **bushel basket**. But, Jesus took an extra step. He applied them in a way that described and illustrated this **core position** he was proclaiming. Among those listening are common **people who have changed something** about their lives and **their living**. By drawing them into the message, Jesus put together a small and highly significant **parable**.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16 NRSV

Jesus, the healer and preacher from Nazareth spoke **the truth**; and, the results of his words and his ministry were **inescapable**. Jesus knew that God was offering **insight** to the followers of Jesus, and that this light of spiritual insight and **action** were a form of **light that cannot be extinguished**. This shining light of **change and transformation** applies to you and me, as well, and will last far beyond anything we do of our own initiative. Even beyond that, the effects of what we do as **disciples of Christ** will **spread** farther than we can imagine.

Jesus imparted all of this to the disciples and the other followers, just after giving them the **Beatitudes**. The setting of the sermon is this: Jesus was sitting, as any rabbi would, and addressed the disciples and followers gathered around him, just the way students would sit listening to their teacher through several hundred years of Jewish tradition. We see a carryover of this in small classrooms of elementary age children today with children gathered on the floor around their teacher. Those gathered before Jesus were the **poor, the merchants, the business people, the craftsmen** like Jesus himself. They were peasants, and some of them likely were **slaves** of wealthy owners. The opponents of Jesus were not present. They are somewhere else for the moment. We'll hear from them later: the **scribes and Pharisees**.

This is a time which is **early** in the **ministry** of Jesus. He is moving beyond healing to preaching to explaining **new insights** about **God's love** and **God's expectation** for the future. And, for perhaps the first time in the lives of the disciples and many others, suddenly the **future** looked far more **welcoming** than they could ever imagine. And, those gathered were anxiously looking to him for **further direction**.

Just as Jesus spoke to his followers, thanks to the gospel writers, he **continues to speak** to you and me. And, what is **our response**? Are you and I looking for **the light**, all the while holding a cover, our bushel basket, that is **hiding** that same **light**? Or, are we merely lighting the flame only to guard it closely, **taking no risk** and **limiting the light**, and the warmth, that it can provide?

Apparently, this image of light was pretty **enduring**. A variant of this scripture gets similar treatment in the *Gospel of Luke*, probably coming from the same source. But, in the expansive writing of the *Gospel of John*, we get even bolder imagery:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:3c-5 NRSV

Now, in *John* Jesus describes himself early on as **the Messiah**, the One who **came from God**; and, **Jesus Christ** is the **Light**. In using this image of light, Jesus got the attention of those closest to him. He wanted them to know that **they were different**. They were being given a **great gift** from God in **Jesus**, the Son of God, who was both **fully human** and **fully divine**.

But, these words from Jesus, this gift of light produces a **light burden**: some added **expectations**. We are to be the **light for others**. You and I **shine in the darkness**, just like the city on the hill. And, this remains truly **Good News**, because there are lots of issues that surround us and try to **block out the light**: untruths, insincere actions, **racial discrimination**, **injustice** in our laws, **poverty**, and fear of foreigners. Through the prophet **Isaiah**, God did not look kindly on those **in power** in Israel. What would God say about the situation of hate and anger and deception and abuse of power which we see **surrounding us** today?

God's Word continues in its proclamation **today**. Being proclaimed, God's Word **claims us**. As Jesus speaks to us now in these images of **light and darkness**, what are **God's expectations** for you and me? After all, in our modern living, you and I rarely think of **bushel baskets** and **lampstands**. So, we have to understand that in ancient Palestine, there was no light switch and no handy butane lighter. Instead, oil was burned in a lamp and carefully guarded since another flame, or a piece of flint and tinder, was needed to light **the wick** in the lamp. Most of us cannot remember using kerosene lanterns to light the home as my grandparents did. But, if you go to remote areas, such as the park grounds atop Mount Le Conte, you get a brief overnight experience of rustic life: no power and no running water.

These words from Jesus hardly express hardship or the burdens of everyday living. But, in these words from scripture Jesus provides a powerful **image of light** and contrasting **darkness**. He understands that we have a **great gift** from God in our development: human vision. And, if you have been through a power outage in the last couple of years, you recall that even a **small flame** can light up a room. In cold weather, even a candle flame can help to **keep out the chill** in a small space. This is some part of the idea that Jesus is drawing on.

Even in this early portion of his ministry, Jesus is bringing about **change**: **God's kingdom** is coming into the world. But, he also wants us to know that we are being **changed**, as well. In their ministry together, the **disciples** and many others began to experience this in themselves. In time, others detected something different, and good, in all of them: a **light of truth, hope, grace, and mercy** shining through them. The disciples and followers of Jesus were being transformed into **witnesses** and messengers of this **new Word**, and that is **hope for all people**. Is there any less expectation for you and me?

And, what are we **being asked** to do? The prophet **Isaiah** had a number of suggestions of how we could use **our gifts** for others. Perhaps, Jesus had these words of Isaiah in mind when he addressed his followers.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

Isaiah 58:7-8 NRSV

The prophet knew that the **people suffered**. And, Isaiah knew of the alien residing among us and the **immigrant seeking freedom**, as well. The light of God shines on them today, as well. And, when we turn our light to those who are ignored others see our work and the light of **knowledge and truth** that is the **living Gospel** in Jesus Christ.

In a short sequence of extraordinary statements, Jesus points out **a new life** for each of us. That means that **our gifts**, the ones which we have that are developed, along with the new ones that **will develop** with God's help, are all available for others to see, **a light shining** within us. And, this light will shine out to **the world** and to the people who surround us. As Jesus said,

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

Matthew 5:14 NRSV

Jesus is saying that whether we know it or not, **we influence** those around us. Through **God's mercy and love and forgiveness** through God's activity within us, we use our gifts **to serve God**. Nevertheless, God has expectations for us in **being the light** and using **our gifts**: all of our resources, our very lives, which become **our work** in the world. After all, our gifts are **provided by God** for the **world**.

Are you and I **looking for the light**, all the while holding a **cover** that is hiding it? Can we honestly say that our gifts are being **used for good**? And, are you and I looking to God as we are being **changed** for **God's work** in the **kingdom**? Through God and Jesus Christ, **our light** will continue to shine for all **the world** to see.

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