

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Matthew 5:13-20

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:20 N.R.S.V.)

A Little of You Matters a Lot

Three friends were out driving one day: a mechanical engineer, a hardware rep., and a computer programmer. As they were driving along a back country road, one of the back wheels fell off. They were going slowly so they were able to stop safely and to recover the wheel. But they could not find the lug nuts. They all looked at each other. Now what were they going to do?

The mechanical engineer said, “no problem, each of the wheels has four lug nuts, so we can just take one lug nut each from the other three wheels and then all the wheels will have three lug nuts. That ought to hold til we get back to town.” It turned out that someone had already tried that trick. None of the other wheels had more than three lug nuts.

The hardware salesman spoke up, there was a hardware store about three miles back. Someone could walk back to the store and get us some new lug nuts. That idea would obviously work, but it was a hot day and none of them really wanted to walk that far. So the two looked at the computer programmer. He had an intent look on his face. He said, “Maybe if we turn the car off and on a few times, it will fix the problem.”

As the old saying goes, “To the person who only has a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” It is hard to be someone you are not.

In our gospel for today, Jesus is training his disciples on how to be his followers. I want you to notice that he doesn’t tell his disciples that they need to become something else, he says, “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

He doesn’t say, “You ought to be the salt of the earth, so as to add flavor to the life of all you meet.” He doesn’t say, “You ought to be the light of the world, so that others can see God.” Jesus says “you already are the salt of the earth. You already are the light of the world.”

One of my seminary professors used to remind us that ought and should are not very good motivators. The words ought and should produce a lot of guilt, but not much else. George went so far as to say that the eleventh commandment is: “Thou shalt not should on thy neighbor.”

Jesus will go on to talk about a lot of difficult things. He commands, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, go the extra mile for those in need.” No doubt the first disciples felt as ill equipped to handle this as we do. Who us?

Jesus might have said, “Okay, never mind, I’ll get some smarter people to do that hard stuff.” He might have, but he didn’t. He said, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

I want you to notice the present tense of what Jesus is saying. He tells his disciples he has work for them to do in the here and now. That is not something that is well understood in our world. If you ask someone today, “what is a Christian?” They might reply that a Christian is a person who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and so will have a home in heaven after they die. But you see, that is all in the future. Christ is more than just our ticket into heaven someday, by and by. Christ is our Lord in the present and he has work for us to be doing now.

It is interesting that in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” But here Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” If that seems too overwhelming, it might be well to remember what the early theologian Thomas Aquinas said. He reminded his congregation that our light is a reflected light. He said, Jesus is the sun, we are the moon. We do not have to generate the light, we only have to reflect the light.

Yes, there is a growing element to Christianity. But it is not about becoming something foreign to our natures. Christian growth is about growing into our true identity.

There is a parallel here between your Christian family and your family of origin. Think of how you grew into your family identity. The first part of that identity is a gift. I am a Koerner. I did not earn that or compete for it, I was born into, it was a gift.

Some things I learned by example and by doing. My parents were very hard working people. And all of us kids worked alongside our parents. All of my brothers and sisters are hard working people. That’s what Koerner’s do.

Some things I learned by family stories. When my grandfather Koerner was a young man, many of the farmers around Helvetia made their own wine. Anytime they got together for harvesting or barn raising, there was a lot of drinking going on. One night my grandfather had too much to drink and he passed out on the walk home. The next morning when he woke up, he realized what had happened. He said to himself, “I can’t be doing this. I have a family to support. They need me.” From that day on he never drank alcohol. From that story I learned that Koerners can exercise self discipline for the sake of their families.

The same things are true of our Christian family. We have not earned a place in God’s family. God has simply chosen us and named us his family. It is a gift.

Some things we learn by the example of Christ and other Christians. Some things we learn as we

do them. Some things we learn from the family stories we read in the Bible. We aren't being transformed into something foreign to our nature, we are living into our identity as the children of God.

Jesus doesn't say, "You should be the light of the world, the salt of the earth." Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world." That is your identity.

Then Jesus says, don't hide your light under a bushel. He is not talking about a unit of measure here. He is talking about something that is placed over a lamp to cover it. The light is still there, you just can't see it.

I want us to think for a minute about what might be the bushels in our lives that hide our lights, that keep us from shining. Maybe it is how busy we are. Maybe it is because we are distracted by other things. But most likely, it is the mistaken belief that our light is too small to matter.

We often think that the world is just so dark that our little light will make no difference at all. Here's the thing, however. The darker it gets, the more effect even a tiny light has. If I strike a match here in this well lighted room, you can still see it, but it doesn't seem all that bright. If we turn off all the lights, the light of the match suddenly seems not dimmer, but brighter. If it was dark outside, the difference would be even more dramatic.

The darker the world gets, the more important even our small light is.

One visitor to a particular church asked one of the men there, if he held an office in the church. The man said, "basketball, all I do is coach basketball." As the man walked away the pastor said, "Don't be fooled. He is very important to our work. He comes in five nights a week to supervise the gym and to coach basketball. That man is one of our most effective ministers."

God doesn't ask us to become something that is foreign to our nature. He doesn't ask us to become bags of gold so that we can buy change in the world. He asks us to be a few grains of salt that will add flavor to life or a tiny flame of light that will push back the darkness.

One of my greatest privileges as a pastor is to see that I am not in this ministry by myself. You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

You went to comfort someone who had just lost a loved one. You didn't preach a sermon. You delivered soup. You gave a hug. You sat with your friend in silence and cried with them. You were light, you were salt!

You went to sit next to the lone visitor on a Sunday morning. You introduced yourself, you helped them with their bulletin and showed them where to find the hymn numbers, you brought them to the fellowship time and introduced them others. You were light, you were salt!

You gave up your Christmas Day to make meals for those who might not have anything to eat. You were light, you were salt!

You said, “Let me help you fill out that job application. I filled out lots of them.” You helped him present himself in the best possible light. “Be honest. Tell them what you have been through. Tell them how you can help their company.” You were light, you were salt!

So many times we think that we need to be like the sun, lighting the whole world at once with huge deeds. Jesus doesn’t ask that of us. He knows that our lights are reflected lights, small lights. But he also knows how important your light is to a dark and hurting world.

Christ already lit his light within you, all you have to do is let it shine!

Amen.