

## **“Letting Our Light Shine”**

### **Matthew 5:13-20**

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste,  
how can its saltiness be restored?

It is no longer good for anything,  
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“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.

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away,  
not one letter, not one stroke of a letter,  
will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever breaks  
one of the least of these commandments,  
and teaches others to do the same,  
will be called least in the kingdom of heaven;  
but whoever does them and teaches them  
will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness  
exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

## **“Letting Our Light Shine”**

Matthew 5:13-20

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

### **I.**

I am not sure about you but, frankly, I have found the sermons of late to be a bit exhausting. We are living in tumultuous times and dealing with significant scripture passages. That these, taken together, would steepen the climb should be of no surprise to us. The rise is not yet over, though, my brothers and sisters. This morning, in Matthew 5:13-20, the second half of the sermon on the mount, we approach the summit. From this point on, there will be no more walking. Will be scrambling on hands and knees for the final ascent.

### **II.**

As we begin the Season of Epiphany Jesus calls the disciples and we discover just how near the Kingdom of God has come. Moreover, because of this, the only option now open to us is to make changes in our lives; that is, to repent. Last week, in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, we discovered what those changes must be: humility, empathy, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart and peace-making. We also discovered the crucial role that these actions of ours have in ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven. Especially as we, with a great wariness, sense the world to be at a tipping point.

Today, though, our goal of discovery will be to see the direction of the movement over these initial weeks of Epiphany. That the Kingdom of Heaven, usually always thought of as “out there” somewhere, is now traveling *toward* us and, even, *near* to us. The resulting changes this nearness foments in our behavior is to, finally, discover that the journey’s end is actually located *within* us in an appreciation for, and an examination of, the salt that is our own selves.

### **III.**

Now, there is an awful lot going on in today’s scripture reading. Jesus wants to be absolutely sure there is no confusion about what he is saying. He is not here to *abolish* the law, he is here to *fulfill* the law. Note, he is not saying this just to keep him out of hot water with the religious leaders. He

wants his followers, in particular, to understand that this is not a matter of tearing down and starting over. Instead, it is a matter of working on, pushing through, bringing to fruition, and sticking to the original plan. This isn't just about the end game, it is also about the process by which we get there. Jesus hopes his followers, those in attendance at the mount who heard his words *that day*, and those in attendance here in the pews who are hearing the Word *this day*, will see the totality of God's purposes stretching from creation to covenant to cross. From the One who made all, to all becoming One.

#### **IV.**

This is interesting and important stuff. Nevertheless, this morning the singular goal for today's sermon will be to pull on a single thread; a single word, really. In verses 14-16, Jesus says:

*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.*

#### **V.**

Certainly, the image of light in the darkness has been a powerful symbol for all ages and in all cultures and religions. Particularly for those of us living so far north of the equator. Often, though, we modern folk have only a superficial appreciation not only for the power of light, but also for the pervasiveness of darkness. As a kind of homework assignment, I would like to ask you today to consider digging out those candles or oil lamps we all have tucked away for the next ice storm and, some evening this week, once darkness has fallen, find a room in your house and light just one candle or lamp. Then, turn off the electric lights and just sit there for awhile. Consider, practically, what you can and cannot do. Contemplate what your life would be like if this was every evening. Give it at least 10 minutes, which I'm telling you right now will be hard. Then, after 10 minutes, light enough candles or lamps so the darkness doesn't feel so oppressive. Then, finally, if you have sufficient number, light as many as you would need to live and function in your home.

## VI.

Homework assigned, we turn our attention to verse 16, and the hard scramble to the summit. In the same way as a city set on a hill cannot be hidden and as lamp is set, not under a bushel basket but on a stand, Jesus commands the listener, those who are the light of the world, to let their light shine before others so that all may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.

Often when we read a very familiar passage such as this one, we tend to focus only on what we have *always* heard it to say rather than what it has *never* said but might yet. I find it curious, and I hope you will too, that Jesus is very precise about the ownership and nature of the light. Throughout the new testament, and throughout the history of the church, one of the more illuminating Christological titles for Jesus, is that of Light of the World.

## VII.

Let us listen to John 1:1-5:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people/the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus is not talking about *his* light, he is talking about *your* light. It is not the light of Christ which is a city set on a hill, it is *your* light. It is not the light of Christ that should not be hidden under a bushel, it is *your* light. It is not the light of Christ the should be allowed to shine before others, it is *your* light. The light Jesus calls upon us to shine, is not the light of *Christ* set inside of us, but that light which is our very *own* residing within each of us.

## VIII.

Though we still have to work out the logistics, this spring we will be having a New Member Sunday for those interested in formally joining the church. The preparation and planning for this has given me occasion to contemplate what membership actually means here on the Park. Now, when I say membership, I am not speaking of it solely in a formal sense though that may be an important part of it. Rather, I am talking about a person's decision to

accept the invitation to engage with, and become a part of, this community. This is not an invitation to signal allegiance to a particular religious denomination, or to sign up for some obligation, or to commit to particular creedal statements, membership here on the park is an invitation to the *experience* of belief.

## **IX.**

Often, when we hear or use the word “belief” we are employing the word with the Latin root, *opino* or *opinari*, meaning opinion; as in having or giving one’s opinion. Our church is not one that is interested in giving our opinions to others, or in having others come and share in, or be obedient to whatever *our* opinions may be. Instead, when I speak of this church’s invitation to belief, I am employing the word with the Latin root, *credo*, meaning to set one’s heart upon or give one’s loyalty to. Let us be clear, however, the membership as invitation of which I am speaking is not an invitation to be loyal to this congregation or, even, to set one’s heart upon Christ. Instead, it is to be loyal to the experience which set’s *your* heart upon yourself to experience God.

## **X.**

Loyalty to this congregation, and having a heart which belongs to Christ, truly only come as a result of experiencing and, hence, knowing the salt of one’s own self. Membership, then, at the Church on the Park is an invitation to a space and a community where each person is *expected* to come and discover and explore their *own* light in the experience of God. Membership at the Church on the Park requires not just asking the question: “Who *am* I?” More importantly each must ask “Who am I *in* God” and “To *whom* do I belong?”

In his wonderful summation of the Law and The Prophets, Jesus directs us, in the Great Commandment, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourself. Yet, how can we love either God or our neighbor unless we both know and love ourselves? The invitation to experience belief is the invitation to *know* and *love* one’s own light, but also to be *responsible* for it.

## **XI.**

Here's a joke for you. Rene Descartes walks into a bar. The bar tender says, "*Hey, Rene, are you going to have your usual?*" To which Rene replies, "*I don't think I am.*" And with that, Descartes disappears! Descartes famous *Ergo Cognito Sum*, "I think therefore I am," is a wonderful reminder to us as a church that in order to keep existing or being each of us must keep *thinking*. Thinking not just about who we are in God but, also, who is God through us; what is our light, and how do we shine it for all the world to see?

We do not stop there, however, as thinking about or knowing oneself, as well as loving oneself, leads us to consider not just our *own* light, but the other lights around us as well. Our very existence is relational. We relate not only to our own self, we think about ourselves in relation to others and to God. *I am because I think*, but, *I also am because we are*, and *I am only as we are* connected.

## **XII.**

The truth is, we simply cannot be human all by ourselves. Church is no longer membership in an institution but a journey toward the possibility of a relationship with people, with a community, a tradition, a sacred space and, of course, with God. However, we only have the ability to give our hearts and offer our loyalty to these others after we begin to know and understand our own light.

While Jesus is correct that a city set on a hill cannot be hidden, at least not from those whose eyes are open, such a city can certainly be missed by those who are *not* searching for it. Especially when its a small city and there are only so many lights to be found. Each Sunday, we come *to* this sanctuary in order to *seek* sanctuary from the darkness of the world. Like the homework I assigned, imagine your role here in the church to be like one candle, quietly but boldly, confronting that darkness. Let each of us, then, tend to our own flame that, together, ours may be a light so bright that the darkness *will* not and *cannot* over come it. In so doing we bring light to all in the house, and all glory to God through the blessed acts we, too, undertake in loyalty to God's Kingdom to which we have given our heart. Amen.