



**“Be the Light”**

**Scripture – Matthew 5.13-20**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, February 5, 2017**

“It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.” I’ve seen variations of this quote floating around social media over the past few weeks — a witness, I’m afraid, to the anxiety of our time.

Many of us will disagree about what constitutes the darkness ... but between the actions of our new administration and the response to them, many throughout our land are anxious or angry or deeply disillusioned. One thing is clear, the events of these weeks have spotlighted the fears and resentments that shadow our common life. Yet some of us can’t even begin to curse any darkness we might see gathering over our nation or our world, for we feel overwhelmed by the gloom in our own homes — homes that feel empty after the loss of someone precious, homes where relationships are breaking, homes that shelter bodies that won’t heal or that are plagued by addiction. For so many reasons, all of us need the reminder: “It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.”

I’m not here to curse the darkness, but to bear witness to the light. For that is what Christ demands of us in this passage: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Let your light shine ...

These verses belong to an extended reflection on righteousness called the Sermon on the Mount, which Matthew places at the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry. This issue of right living is so crucial for Matthew’s Jesus that he wastes no time telling his community what it means to follow Christ ...

A little trick for students of Scripture: If you want to know what Jesus is about in each of the Gospels, take a look at how he begins his ministry ...

In **Mark**, the newly baptized Christ casts out an unclean spirit, proving to bystanders and readers alike that the Son of God is the “ultimate boundary crosser.”<sup>1</sup>

In **Luke**, Jesus returns from the wilderness to announce that he’s come to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind... a message that positions him well for ministry among the poor and marginalized, but that also gets him run out of town.

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

For **John**, Christ's inaugural act is a miracle ... Jesus turns everyday water into extravagant wine — showing all with eyes to see that he is “the very presence of God's abundant grace.”<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us back to **Matthew** ...

In this Gospel we meet Jesus the Teacher — the one who stands on the shoulders of the prophets to teach us about righteousness. That is why Jesus begins his ministry with a three-chapter treatise we've come to call the Sermon on the Mount ... Having summoned fishermen from their nets, Jesus waxes poetic on holy living — instructing his disciples and the gathered crowds, as well as 21st century Christians, what it means to follow the Christ. Jesus does this to reveal who he is, but also to reveal who *we* are — Students of Truth and Disciples of the Way, Salt of the Earth and Light of the World ... those who have witnessed the light of Christ and must now bear his light to others ...

But, for disciples two thousand years removed from Christ's teachings, these metaphors are not exactly self-explanatory ... *Excuse me, Rabbi Jesus. What on earth does it mean to be 'Salt' and 'Light'?*

Scholars have pondered the meaning of salt ... It adds taste; it preserves food; it can be used to purify.<sup>3</sup> Salt also stimulates thirst,<sup>4</sup> which is a suggestion I find particularly interesting as Jesus has just proclaimed, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Perhaps the charge to be ‘Salt of the Earth’ means encouraging others to crave justice that rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). In any case, what this metaphor boils down to is that salt does not exist for itself, but for others. And, like salt, we disciples are called to pour ourselves out for the sake of the world.<sup>5</sup>

Well, that sounds a bit daunting. Pour ourselves out for the sake of the world? ... *Rabbi Jesus, I'm not so sure about these teachings ... Tell us more about the light.*

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “... A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Ok, that sounds more fun ... How hard can it be ‘to shine before others’?

Perhaps more difficult than we realize, particularly if we look back to the law and the prophets Jesus draws upon. We need only look to Isaiah — to the passage paired with these verses from Matthew — for illumination:

There, Isaiah states plainly what the Lord requires of the faithful: Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless poor into your house. Clothe the naked. Satisfy the needs of the afflicted ... “Then,” God says, “*Then*, your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (58:10).

Isaiah's prophecy sheds light (no pun intended) on what it means to be the light of the world: as followers of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to the cause of justice until the destitute want for nothing, and the suffering find release ... If we are to be a City on a Hill, it seems we must stand as a beacon of hope for those searching in the dark for answers. If we are to ‘let our light shine before others,’ we must bear witness to the Messiah who comes to re-order life, so that those who mourn will be comforted and those who hunger are filled.

*Oh, Rabbi Jesus, you do expect a lot from us.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson Powery, “Commentary on Matthew 5:13-20,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<sup>4</sup> Charles James Cook, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Edited by David L. Bartlee and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> Emerson Powery, “Commentary on Matthew 5:13-20,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

It's overwhelming, this business of being Salt and Light ... of following Christ in a world shrouded in darkness. How can we pretend to be the Light of the World when some of us can hardly peek out from behind veils of fear or anger or heartache? How can we aspire to be a City on a Hill — shining for all to see — when we're not sure how to dispel the shadows cast by pain and suffering in our homes and communities, much less in our world?

Yet, despite the challenge inherent in following Jesus, I find hope in this passage — in Christ's call to be the light. I find hope in a little, almost throw-away line in Jesus' teaching: "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.*"

It gives light to all in the house ... Not the neighborhood. Or the nation. Or the world. But to the house. Just the house.

Though Jesus commands us to be the Light of the World — a City on a Hill — he calls us to something smaller, something more attainable, much less overwhelming: Set your lamp on the stand so it can give light to those in your little corner of the world ...

Reflect Christ's love by caring for a friend in crisis. Practice God's justice by serving a meal at Epiphany House, or listening to the story of someone who is different from you. Commit to doing one thing that will make you a better steward of God's creation. Help teach our youngest disciples about Christ's love and grace. Give an hour a week to a local ministry or non-profit. Whatever your gifts, whatever your passion, I hope you will discover one way — just one small way to bear Christ's light to those around you, to live your life in service to others ...

As many of you know, I recently returned from Guatemala. Along with three of our members, and a handful from other congregations, I was there to meet with and learn from partners in mission — from sisters and brothers who are committed to transforming lives in this struggling land. Throughout the week, our group encountered a number of people who are bearing witness to the light of Christ in small but mighty ways, from starting creative businesses so they can send their children to school, to praying for sisters and brothers here at Westminster on a daily basis. I'm sure the four of us will have many stories to tell, but I want to share one with you today:

It's about how one of our traveling companions discovered a way to serve God in Guatemala. Years ago, Anne was visiting women in the town of San Juan Ostuncalco, which is the center of our shared partnership in Guatemala. As now, the need in San Juan was great ... The women of this community are trapped in a cycle of poverty, and — with little access to education — have few opportunities to improve their lives or the lives of their families. During a conversation with these women, Anne asked the question: "If you could have one thing to make your lives better, what would it be?" "A sewing machine," the women replied.

A sewing machine. *Now that, I can help with,* thought Anne. So she went out, along with the woman who runs this Women's Association, to purchase a single sewing machine. Just one. But it was something she could do to bear witness to Christ's love in that little corner of the world. After all, it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.

But that little flame, set upon the stand for all to see, gave light to all in the house. As Anne told the story of these Guatemalan women, others began to contribute — giving small donations or purchasing sewing machines in honor of loved ones. And with each gift, the light grew and grew ... Now there are two full Sewing Schools, where dozens of women learn how to embroider and sew, gaining skills that will improve their lives and the lives of their children.

It's amazing the power of a single, flickering flame — how a small act of love can reflect Christ's light to another. I've had enough conversations with you to know that such acts are often the very lights we need to celebrate, particularly in times of crisis when the darkness threatens to snuff out the light ...

So let your light shine before others. Do not hide it under a bushel, but put it on the lamp stand for all to see. Illumine one little corner of this light-hungry land. And together — by God’s grace — we will be that city on a hill, giving light to all the world.

### **The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Greg Jones**

Eternal God, sometimes we may feel as if we are no more than one tiny candle in a world of darkness, a pitiful flicker in a malicious environment. But rather than allowing ill winds to extinguish our flame, we remember the ***word*** of Jesus to treat others as we want to be treated and we refuse to be stuffed out.

We remember the ***mission*** of Jesus to bring good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, and to bring freedom to the oppressed, and it encourages us to shine like a lamp in a room of shadows, chasing away fears that destruction is near.

We remember the ***call*** of Jesus to feed the hungry, to comfort the ill, and to welcome the stranger, and it inspires us to become a beacon of light in a callous climate, extending compassion to those in dire need and in danger.

We remember the ***courage*** of Jesus to remain faithful to you when faced with enemies of your righteous realm and it emboldens us to become lasers of love –

exposing lies to the light of day,  
shining truth into places of injustice,  
igniting spontaneous acts of grace to people who suffer,  
and revealing your will to a troubled world that has forgotten the path that leads to peace.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the word of Jesus, the mission of Jesus, the call of Jesus, and the courage of Jesus that kindle our hope and challenge us to shine in your light-starved world. Amen.