

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 5, 2017

“Lighten Up.”

Matthew 5:13-16

I have selected the song you have sung earlier to bring back memories of Sunday School. Imagine this image: Children in a church pageant, holding candles, singing, “This Little Light of Mine.”

That’s the image that most of us have in mind when we think of this song. It portrays itself as sentimental and cute. Which is the danger of using words like “little”... “This little light of mine.”

It comes across as dear or sweet, and often it takes the power right out of it. So, we look at it as a children’s song not realizing the powerful lyrics...

Actually, the song is an Afro-American spiritual. It was sung, as I understand it, in black churches many years ago, just as the people were preparing to leave the church and go back out into the world.

They sang it as they prepared to go out and make a witness in the world.

So, I would like you to hold in your mind another image with this song. Not one of little children singing it, but an image of people called to change the world, and willing to make sacrifices for it.

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. The song is based on our text for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is saying to us: Read Scripture...

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden....so let your shine light before people, so they can see the things you do, and praise your Father who is in heaven.” Jesus had in mind changing the world.

You can see that, especially in the context that comes in the fifth chapter of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is chapters five to seven in Matthew. This comes right after the Beatitudes, the summary of Jesus’ teaching to us:

Blessed are the humble...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the peacemakers...

Then these verses come, You are the light of the world...

This is no Kindergarten cuteness. This is Kingdom mission.

It is even more remarkable when you realize that in the New Testament, light is associated with the titles for Jesus. He is called “the light of the world.” He is to be the “light to the Gentiles.” In the Gospel of John, the metaphor of light describes who Jesus is and what he came for. “In him was light, and that light was the life of the world.” “The light has come into darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

So when Jesus says, “You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works...” what he’s saying is, if you call yourself a Christian, then your vocation is no different than mine. I was the light of the world, now you are the light of the world. Through my life, through my good deeds, through my love, I brought people back to God. So let your light shine that you may do the same thing.

The seriousness of it all can be seen in another old song about light, “Let the lower lights be burning.” I used the first verse of that old hymn in my pastoral prayer...

“Brightly beams our Father’s mercy, From his lighthouse evermore;

But to us he gives the keeping of the lights along the shore.”

I heard that old hymn often at Center Park United Methodist Church, our home church in Michigan.

“Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave! Some poor, fainting, struggling seaman,

You may rescue, you may save.”

It has been some time ago, that I read the story of the hymn. I saw the power in the words written by Philip Bliss over a century and a half ago. He was an itinerant musician, which is what you usually do if you are a musician; you spend a lot of time looking for work. He traveled around, taught music and voice. He even sang professionally.

For a while he was living in Chicago. He went to hear the great evangelist, Dwight L. Moody.

In that sermon, Moody talked about a ship that was trying to find Cleveland harbor in the midst of a storm, in the darkness of night.

The captain could see the lighthouse. He drew near, shouted to the lighthouse keeper, "Is this Cleveland?" The lighthouse keeper shouted back, "Quite true, sir." The captain asked, "Where are the lower lights?" The lighthouse keeper said, "They have gone out. Can you make the harbor?"

The captain replied, "We must, or we will perish."

With that said, he sailed his ship into the harbor, passed the lighthouse, missed the channel, and was dashed against the rocks. It was a terrible tragedy with many losses.

Moody brought that story home with these words. He said, "Brothers and sisters, the Master will take care of the lighthouse. Let us keep the lower lights burning."

Until I read that story, I didn't know what "lower lights" were. I thought it was a strange phrase, "Let the lower lights be burning." But the lower lights are the lights away from the lighthouse that illumine the water line. They enable the ships to come into the harbor at night, through the narrow channel of the harbor's mouth.

That comes close to what Jesus is talking about. "Let your lights shine." He is talking about the redemptive power of human deeds. He is talking about the redemptive power of love and compassion, and kindness and concern for other people. You may think that you don't have very much to offer, that your light doesn't shine very bright compared to the luminaries of time. But I tell you, in the darkness of somebody's life, the smallest light can save.

Those of you who have been in darkness, you know this. You know the redemptive power of small deeds. Stuck in darkness of sorrow and depression, nobody seems to care. At such a time you are aware of the fact that most people aren't even aware of who you are. They don't even know about you, probably don't even care. You are very much aware of your isolation and grief.

Then the phone rings. Or, the mail comes. Or, there is a visit. It's such a simple thing to the person who gives it. But not to you. You will never forget it. It is light coming into your darkness.

There is something else I want you to see in this text. Jesus says, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." Every time I read that, I think of this church. We are a church set upon a hill. Not literally, but we have a terrific location. And as you know, location is everything. I notice it when I drive by the corner of Lehigh and Stanford, where we can hang our church news, I see so many possibilities to let our light shine for others to see...

We probably won't be able to put our signs up high, because the city has ordinances about signs in Pueblo, but we can paint our buildings. That's what we can do. We can paint them with bright colors and everybody will notice us.

We're a city set on a hill. We can't hide.

I don't think that's what Jesus meant. I don't think that's why people come to church. You know what brings people to church? Light. They come to church looking for light. When your world is dark, you look for light. People come to church to find light.

You are a city set on a hill...You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before others, that people will see your good works and come to God.

This church is set here in this place for a mission. You are part of that mission. All of you are part of that mission. People will be drawn to this church by what they see in you. So, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.