

Let Your Light Shine

Matthew 5:13-20

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Feb. 9, 2014 Epiphany 5A

They tell a story about a king who had three sons. He had to choose which son would be the crown prince—the one to inherit his throne. How should he choose? They were all fine young men, each with different virtues and strengths. So he called them together, and gave each one a small treasure chest with their equivalent of tens of thousands dollars in it. “I want you each to buy me a birthday present,” he explained, “and the one who makes the best choice will be my choice for crown prince. There’s only one condition. The gift has to fill an entire room this size.” The princes gasped, because it was a very large room, and each prince would fill one just like it. They had a few months, though, to plan and work out something. The oldest, Prince Alexander, called in royal advisors to begin planning. The middle, Prince Benjamin, went to the university to meet with the brightest professors. The youngest, Prince Christopher, took a walk. Outside the palace gate, he saw a poor beggar, and his heart was filled with pity, so he dropped in some money from his treasure chest—not much, but enough to give the beggar food and clothing. Then he passed by a cottage and heard parents crying over the crib of a terribly ill child. So he gave them enough money to get medical attention. The pattern continued. The older two worked busily at their task, and the youngest kept seeing areas of need and helping out as he could.

Finally the day came—the King’s birthday. The time for the sons to give the king his presents. Prince Alexander took his father into the first room, and his father saw that the room was filled with beautiful cloth banners and hangings and carpets. The king thanked his son and went to the next room. There, Prince Benjamin had artists and sculptors create a giant statue honoring the king, a statue that reached nearly to the ceiling. The king was touched, and thanked Prince Benjamin. Finally, they went to the room Prince Christopher had been assigned to fill. Now this prince had given away almost all the money, and had improved the lives of hundreds of people in the kingdom, and the people had come to love him dearly. So with the few coins he had left, he brought a nice candle and a candle holder. The family walked into the dark room, and Christopher lit the candle. The light filled the room. “Because your wisdom is rooted in love and compassion, my son, you have won the crown,” said the king.ⁱ

One day a couple of weeks ago, my grandson was with me in the car, and it was getting dark. "Look," he said, "Christmas lights." And indeed, I looked over and lights were scattered across the bushes in a front yard, still glowed in the January gloom. Did somebody forget to turn off the automatic timer, or did they, like us, appreciate a little light on a dark evening?

The Season of Epiphany started out with light, as the three magi followed a star through dark places to find the Christ child. The Gospel of John, near the beginning, says, "What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. ... The light shines in the darkness, The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light." (John 1:4-5, 9-10 CEV).

Now, late in the Season of Epiphany, we have a grown Jesus preaching and teaching. Scholars differ. Was the Sermon on the Mount addressed to the crowds, or was it instructions for the leaders, the disciples who would later carry out his message of Good News? We don't know for sure, but we do know that Matthew, in writing the Gospel, wanted us to read them and hear them and try to live them. Last Sunday, we explored the opening of the Sermon on the Mounts, the Beatitudes. They weren't commands—get out there and be meek; they weren't goals; rather, they were indicative statements on living as Jesus would want us to live.

The Beatitudes end with verse 10, "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." But then Jesus switches from third person to second person, and says, "Happy are YOU when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you." He's not just talking about people out there, suddenly he's challenging his listeners, inviting them, us, to be willing to get in trouble for our

faith. I'm not too crazy about hearing this, since I like things nice and quiet. But then I remember the saying, "If being a Christian were against the law, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" And many times and in many places, over the last 20 centuries, people have gotten into trouble for their faith.

Then Jesus switches gears again, but still talking to his audience directly, says, "you are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." We all know people who light up the room with their joy and enthusiasm, and we all know people that we call "the salt of the earth," down-to-earth folks who quietly live out their faith, who get the jobs done.

Amy Oden, a church history professor in Oklahoma, puts it this way. "We *are* the tastiness that adds salt to lives around us. We *are* light that makes plain the justice way of the kingdom of God. Jesus says we must be tasty and lit up in order to make a difference for God in the world. Neither salt nor light exists for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose when used, poured out."ⁱⁱⁱ

Again, note that Jesus isn't giving commands or requirements. He isn't telling us to be the light or the salt, or we can't be Christians. There's no "You'd better be..." or "You must..." Rather, he's saying that we're already light and salt. We're already brightness and tastiness. We're already in a place where we can let our lives, our faith, and our love make a positive difference. Jesus is giving the original disciples and us a commission, a calling, to go ahead and make that positive difference. Act like that which you already are—a beloved child of God, who has good news to share, by word and by deed.

Jesus goes on to say some tougher words, all about the law. He didn't come to get rid of the law, but to fulfill it; and then he challenged his disciples that they must be more righteous than the Pharisees. That sounds like bad news, since by the standards of literal interpretation of the law, the Pharisees applied the law to both others and themselves very, very strictly indeed. But Jesus was talking about the fulfillment of the law, which he later

defined as loving God with your whole heart, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Dr. Delmer Chilton puts it this way: "The purpose of Torah was to teach the Jews to be righteous. It was also the purpose of the Torah to make the Jewish community a light shining in the world's darkness, a city on a hill that would show the way to all the world. In today's Gospel lesson, we are invited, called, commissioned, ordained, anointed, to join the Jews in being Torah people. We are sent out to be people who show God's way to the world more through our lives than through our words."ⁱⁱⁱ

St. Paul was a Pharisee before he became a Christian, and he still called himself a Pharisee after he became a Christian. But he discovered that in Jesus Christ there was a wisdom that was different than the world's wisdom, because it was rooted in the mind of Christ. He quoted Isaiah, who said, "God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being."^{iv} There's a mystery to God, a wonder that the rational mind can't comprehend, and the key to that mystery is one man, powerless except for the power of love and self-sacrifice, hung on the cross; that God raised him from the dead; and through that, God brought salvation and redemption.

Paul wanted of the Christians in Corinth the same thing that Jesus wanted of his own disciples; that they, and ultimately we, should bring the love of Christ to a broken and troubled world. Let's take them up on that! Let's be light; let's be salt! Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Source unknown

ⁱⁱ workingpreacher.org, February 9, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ lectionarylab.com, Feb. 9, 2014

^{iv} 1 Corinthians 2:9, CEV