

Sermon: Meaning to the Light
5 Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 5:13-20

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Jesus tells his disciples: "You are the light of the world."

Former Presiding Bishop Edmond Lee Browning wrote in a devotional,

Often when we were on Okinawa, the lights would go out--- the power supply was somewhat unsteady in those days. The kids were little, and supper time was always a circus anyway, but when the lights went out suddenly in the middle of it, everything came to an abrupt halt for a second. Then we'd get out the candles and get some light on the subject, finishing our supper by candlelight.

The children just loved this. Sometimes they'd beg to have candles at supper time even when the electricity was working. It seemed exciting to them. And to tell you the truth, it was oddly wonderful for us, too. Somehow the conversation was different when the lights went out, quieter. I think we all felt safe inside, in our little pool of candlelight. After supper, we'd put the children to bed by candles and make sure they would hear us from their beds in the dark...We were always a little sorry when the lights flickered back on later in the evening...We remember those nights long ago. Safe and surrounded by a pool of light, like the love of God.ⁱ

The love of God can be understood in Jesus' metaphor of being light in the world; the light is a visual reminder of God's presence within us and around us. All this talk about light and love is all well and good but what about the darkness? Where does it seem particularly dark to you right now? Maybe in stories you read in the newspaper? Maybe in a troubled relationship? Maybe your dead-end job seems like a stream of boring, meaningless tasks? Perhaps you are deeply sad about the loss of a loved one and don't feel you can talk about it or maybe you have some deep regret in your past or in the present and you simply cannot shake the shame of it. Perhaps your darkness can be labeled as fear.

Many of us are so easily distracted, so easily tossed about in the sea of news and fake news, so quickly discouraged by much of the information we digest, we often feel overwhelmed in the darkness. We sometimes feel caught up in the fast turning wheels of a changing world. We all suffer (or we will if we live long enough!) but darkness or suffering can bring new meaning to the light. And sometimes darkness can enhance the light. Could there be some benefit to darkness? I wonder if sometimes darkness helps us become more clear in priorities or bring us to a new understanding. What if the darkness in your life moved you toward God's light? Perhaps we can consider that the darkness issues an invitation to draw closer to the source of light? What if we started putting a stick in the wheels of that fast moving world once in a while?

Jesus is saying through these words of today's passage, As my disciples, YOU are the light. In other words, God's light, God's love IS IN YOU. God is with us, in us, acting through us every

day. Maybe God's big concern is that we be more and more aware of his presence within so we remember our connectedness to God and to the world. It is all one creation. And our role is to be the light, to relieve the suffering of others as we are able with the gifts we have been given.

Since Emmanuel has been going out to Augusta Correctional Center the past couple of years, we have been receiving letters from a few of the inmates. One named Christopher recently wrote, "Dear Family, Praise God from whom all blessings flow. I'm taking the time to write this letter to express my gratitude to you for your love and faithfulness to God for your presence and sacrifice for coming to worship and fellowship with us lifting up the name of Jesus. Jesus said 'when I was in prison you visit(ed) me.' I feel every time when you come and visit, those very words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew come alive...." He goes on to write, "God is always there and he has his own ways of working things out. It stands out to me that God is here even in prison with me and there with you all. He has his loving, caring and healing hands on us in every part of our lives." (letter dated 1/19/17)

God's light shines in Christopher. God's light shines – even in prison. When Jesus says we are light in the world, he is saying we have an innate capacity for goodness, that we have the love of God, already there. Maybe we just need to relax a bit and increase our awareness that the kingdom of God is in us. What if we took a few minutes to look, really look at the bird outside our window to see her beauty, to see how resourceful she is, to see God's creative spirit in this magnificent creature? What if we stopped to look, really look at the face of the child or the aging husband who is at our dinner table? What if we stopped and sat down with an elderly man and took time to listen, really listen to his stories of when he was a young man? What if we focus on the light within us and realize this light within is God at work connecting us to the rest of God's creation?

Remembering Presiding Bishop Browning's story of the lights going out in Okinawa and his family being surround by this pool of light, I am going to ask George(?) to turn out all the lights here, except the one lighting up the cross. Let's turn off the news for a while, let's turn down the noise. Let's just sit in the darkness and take (three) minutes to focus on this light, both the light itself but more importantly what this light points to: the light of Christ within us. (Pause in the silent darkness for about three minutes) You are the light of the world. Amen.

ⁱ A Year of Days, Edmond Lee Browning, day: January 31, 1997.