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People of Light
James 1:17

During our recent vacation Barbara and I were able to spend some time in Santa Fe, New Mexico. One of the characteristics of that part of the world which always brings me up short is the brilliance of the light. At 7,000 feet altitude the air is thinner and the sun is closer. The play of colors is so different than it is in Illinois. The sky is a far richer blue than we ever see here. The muted tones of the sunset flowing from pink to brown to gray as the clouds splash against the mountain peaks is beautiful and distinctive. It is easy to understand why artists have found those vistas such a compelling subject.

One evening we came out of a restaurant finding the light of Santa Fe performing in a very different way. An early evening rain had ended. The sky cleared and a huge rainbow filled the sky. It was a perfect 180 degree arc projecting all the colors of the rainbow framing the historic plaza of that city. Our restaurant was just a few blocks west of the plaza and we were perfectly positioned to enjoy the light show. For fifteen minutes we stood there caught up in the brilliance of the light and the glow that it cast over the plaza. Other people who were walking by running errands or on their way home saw what was happening and stopped to join us. Together we were transfixed by a miracle of light. In that moment we had become a people of light.

The letter of James was written to a people who were struggling with the darkness. They were trying to find a way to be the church in a hostile world. They experienced the darkness in the form of a culture that sees the church as a threat to the *status quo* and makes it a target of persecution. But the most threatening darkness is that which infects the church from within. This darkness lives in the hearts of the people. It comes from the assumption that the future of the church depends on their resources of wealth, power, and talent. Many have come to believe that if they do not bring enough to the table the church cannot survive. Their hearts are burdened with anxiety.

The writer of James challenges the church to base its future on a very different understanding. The existence of the church is the gift of God who brings light when we least expect it. The faith on which the church is based is not something we produce. It does not depend on our resources. It is a gift from above. In James 1:17 we read, "Every generous act of giving with every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." The Father of lights exposes the darkness of our stubborn and anxious hearts. As this light penetrates our hearts we are set free to be the church. It is that opportunity that we celebrate on Registration Sunday.

John Calvin described this spiritual transformation in Book IV of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In this section he wrote about the ministry of scripture and the sacraments in forming the church as a community. In order for scripture and sacraments to inspire us our hearts must be receptive. Calvin described that process in these words:

The Spirit does this same sort of work in us. For, that the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and

composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of the Lord. Finally, the Spirit transmits those outward words and sacraments from our ears to our soul...Meanwhile, the Father of Lights [cf. James, 1:17] cannot be hindered from illumining our minds with a sort of intermediate brilliance through the sacraments, just as he illumines our bodily eyes by the rays of the sun (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:14:10).

People of light understand that the brilliance of God's Spirit forms the community that we call the church.

Jesus addresses this issue in the seventh chapter of Mark's gospel. Here Jesus encounters a group of religious leaders who challenge his ministry. They have come from Jerusalem which is the center of their religious tradition. They confront Jesus with their concern that he does not value their tradition enough. They believe that neither Jesus' teaching nor the practices of his disciples respects the central role that tradition plays in their faith. It is tradition that sets them apart from the polytheistic religions of their culture. It is tradition that tells them who they are. From their perspective Jesus and his disciples are dangerous innovators.

When Jesus responds to these religious leaders he makes it clear that the issue is not the struggle between tradition and innovation. The truth is that we need both. The religious leaders have lost sight of the truth that their community of faith exists as a gift of God. That's why Jesus calls attention to the condition of their hearts. He quotes the words of Isaiah:

This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me (Mark 7:6).

It is the unexpected gift of God's light which can soften stubborn hearts and make us people who come together to worship and serve God.

The same struggle afflicts the church today. We have seen time and again how passionately church people fight over some treasured sliver of tradition. We have seen how eager some are to leave the church or create schism when they do not get their way. We have also seen those who chase after every new innovation in the life of the church as if everything depends on that. But both of these approaches miss the point of what the church is all about. We are called to be people of light. Our existence is about reflecting the light that comes to us from above.

This understanding of the church was ingrained in the followers of John Calvin who survived more than a century of genocide in France. During the last half of the 17th century all the Protestant churches in France were destroyed. In the early 1800s Protestants were allowed to rebuild. Every Protestant church I visited in France displayed over the main entrance or some prominent place the Latin inscription *Post Tenebrae Lux*. This is a motto they received from John Calvin which means "after the darkness, light." It is a powerful reminder that we are called to be people of light.

When the Santa Fe rainbow faded away, Barbara and I walked several blocks to reach our parked car. Our walk took us past the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe. There we saw a couple who were pausing at the door of the church, apparently coming out of a meeting. They smiled at the two strangers who were walking in front of their church. Then one of them called out to us, "Did you see the rainbow?" I can't imagine a better image of what the church is called to be.