

Sermon – “Light”
Saturday, April 28, 2018
Scripture Readings: Genesis 1:1-5 and Matthew 5:10-16
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Our first scripture reading is the first five verses of the entire Bible. Listen now for God’s word to you in Genesis, chapter 1, verses one through five.

¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

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Our second scripture reading, from the Gospel of Matthew, takes place in the middle of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. Listen now for God’s Word in Matthew 5, 11 through 16.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

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And God said, “Let there be light.”¹ This familiar text gives us the very first recorded individual act of creation. Before the humans, before the animals, the plants, before the sky and before the earth, God brought light into being. On the very first day, although admittedly it is hard to say exactly what a “day” was, since there doesn’t seem to have been a rotating planet earth under the sun yet— in fact, there was no sun yet at all, which is an interesting curiosity. That is, there were no stars and no sun from which light could come, but there was light, nevertheless. The earliest moment of the universe, the first experience of the new creation, was the light of God, spoken into being.

This is not surprising, given the place that light occupies throughout the Bible. God seems to be a God of light. God is constantly the source of light to all. As it is in the first day, in the beginning, when the light of God fills the universe, it will be in the last day, when, according to Isaiah and Revelation, in the new Zion there will be no sun or moon, but the light of God will fill creation.²

God is the eternal source of light, and bringing light to creation, to us, is a constant theme. The very first lights God puts into the universe, the sun and the moon and the stars, were given “for signs and for seasons and for days and years,” to mark and show the passing of the times in which we live.³ Light is a gift to us; it shows us the way, as it, coming from a bright star, showed the wise men the way to the Christ child.⁴ In light we can see, we can walk without stumbling. The author of Psalm 27 says, “The LORD is my light and my salvation.”⁵ Jesus is given to us as the “light of the world,” the “light of life.”⁶ God brings the light of illumination, the light of hope, the light of love.

And like most gifts, it seems to be given to us to share. John the Baptist was sent “to testify to the light,”⁷ and it would appear that we have another version of the same role, both in fulfillment of the Great Commission to make believers of all nations⁸ and in fulfillment of the commandment to love one another and our neighbors.⁹ One example of this command is in Matthew 5, where we are told we are salt and light to the world.

Now, this is an interesting passage, because it depicts our duty of bringing light in two rather different ways. On one hand, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”¹⁰ And on the other hand, right after this he says, “[L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”¹¹ Consider the differing implications of each of these statements.

¹ Genesis 1:3 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² See Isaiah 60:19-22, possibly Isaiah 24:23, and Revelation 21:23-25.

³ Genesis 1:14 (*NRSV*).

⁴ See Matthew 2:2-11.

⁵ Psalm 27:1 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Both quotes from John 8:12 (*NRSV*).

⁷ John 1:7 and 1:8 (*NRSV*).

⁸ See Matthew 28:18-20.

⁹ See John 13:34-35, John 15:12-13, Matthew 22:34-40, and Mark 12:28-34.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:10-12a (*NRSV*).

¹¹ Matthew 5:16 (*NRSV*).

First, Jesus suggests that we will encounter persecution and be hated if we bring the light of truth of Jesus and of righteousness. This should not be surprising. In the book of John, Jesus tells us, “[T]he light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”¹² In other words, the light is not always welcomed, because darkness allows us to hide from truths we’d rather not see, truths that lie bare and illuminated in the presence of the light of truth.

But there is also the other statement. “[L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Here we have the implication that living a life as a light-bearer will bring about *positive* reactions. Far from evoking scorn and insult, it inspires praise of God.

Are these statements standing in opposition to one another? I don’t believe they are. The first suggests that no matter what, some people are going to reject what we have to say and be offended by what we stand for. We have to be ready for that, ready to remain committed to God even in the face of harsh criticism. I am sure every one of us can think of examples of places where, if we bring Christ, we are not welcome.

The second passage tells us, though, that carrying the light, however hard and opposed it may be, bears good fruit and gives glory to God. It also puts us in our place. Jesus is warning of resistance, but he is not telling us to proclaim righteousness so we can be proud of ourselves and hold ourselves up above sinners. It is “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” No, not everyone will receive the truth we have to offer, but we are still offering it, we are doing it for them, not ourselves, and our goal is that they should give praise to God.

Now if our duty is not to ourselves but to them, that they should recognize that what we offer is truly good, we have a responsibility to make our message visible as light—that is, recognizable as truly good. Living a true light-bearing life of the Spirit that people will receive well and for which they will give praise to God involves a lot of factors, but I’d like to highlight one today: non-judgmentalism.

Non-judgmentalism can be a bit hard to get a good handle on in today’s world. If I were to say to Christians across today’s United States, “One thing we as the church need more of is non-judgmentalism,” it would provoke two opposite reactions, and each group would be surprised that anyone else would react differently.

Some people would think, “Of course! Obviously we need more non-judgmentalism in the church. Look at how much harm we have done, and for how many obstacles we have placed between people and their savior by judging them with our human judgments and applying the name of Jesus Christ, Son of God to our pronouncements!” And they’re right. How many people do you know whose lives have been harmed and whose relationships with God have been tragically harmed by self-superior people passing judgment upon them in the name of the Lord? I know plenty, and I bet you do, too.

¹² John 3:19b-21 (NRSV).

But other people would become very uncomfortable about an unqualified call for more non-judgmentalism. These are the people whose attention is on the fact that there is a legitimate difference between right and wrong, and refusing to judge and differentiate between the two is actually horrible. And they're right, too. We do live in a society that often seems to go so far as to declare that we have no right to make claims about right and wrong as universal truths. We can have "values," that is, personal choices about what to deem important, but "morals," things which have authority over everyone, are not polite. And that is a legitimate problem. Refusing to pass judgment can amount to looking the other way at things that need to be judged as wrong. The church can be, and often has been, lukewarm and toothless, standing for nothing and against nothing. But that is a problem to take up another time.

Here I will just say that the problem is not with true non-judgmentalism; the Bible clearly condemns our being judgmental. The problem is that there is cultural conditioning and hard-to-avoid ambiguity around the word "judgment," and it often is not clear what someone means when they say it. So let's zero in on exactly what I'm talking about when I say that bearing the light of God means being non-judgmental.

The Biblical commands to refrain from judging seem to be telling us two things.

One: we have no right to condemn a person, for that is God's job. Only God can see inside a person, and only God has full wisdom about good and evil.

Two: we are under orders to forgive and grant mercy, for God will forgive us as we forgive others and judge us as we judge others.¹³

That other kind of thing, the refusal to distinguish between good and evil, is not what I have in mind when I say we should be non-judgmental. Indeed, it is clear that God's light coming into the world means that truth will be illuminated, and falsehood shown for what it is. Our obligation to be non-judgmental in bearing the light of Christ does not mean we should have no moral voice. But it still is a real obligation, and often when we think we are illuminating truth we are really driven by something else. Judgmentalism can creep in where we aren't necessarily aware of it— although those being judged usually are quite aware of it.

One of the most common ways we judge without realizing it is by drawing lines and placing people on the other side of them. I see this a lot in the public Christian voice, unfortunately. It is difficult to voice an opinion for one *thing* and against another *thing* without being for *some people* and against other *people*, but that is what we are asked to do. Even when people would undermine truths we hold dear, we have a choice. Either we can stand up against those people, or we can stand up against their untruth. We often make the mistake of doing the first, even though Christ's presence in the world shows us a powerful example of doing the second. It often may be tempting, whether coming from the left, the right, or anywhere else, to say that "those people," whoever they are, the wrong ones, are against justice and thus in opposition to Jesus Christ, set ourselves at odds with them, and declare them enemies.

¹³ See Matthew 6:12, Matthew 7:1-2. Also interesting in this context is the prophetic judgment passed on King David in 2 Samuel 12, in which David condemns a man described to him in parable form, and it turns out to be a description of, and therefore judgment passed, on David himself!

But we are told to bear the light of that same Christ to those same people! We are told to make it visible to them. And it is meant to be good news. How can we ever imagine it to be good evangelism to draw up battle lines and place people on the other side of them? If we say to people, “Christ is against you,” we have painted Christ as their enemy. We have told them bad news, not good news, and who then could expect them to make a choice for the Christ we have just said is their adversary? In other words, in setting Christ against people, Christians are also setting those people against Christ.

God did something completely different. From an objective standpoint, we are *all*, every one of us, as sinners, enemies of God, but “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”¹⁴ God’s face was not forever set against us because of our sins and evils; God came to us in order to turn us around and rescue us from those things.

And by so doing, God illustrated the inexplicable nature of divine love. God did not require us, wandering about in fallenness and sin, to find our own way back. God shone the light out into the darkness, to find us there.¹⁵ And God calls us, the church, to be a beacon that shines with the same light of Christ.

So when we encounter people who don’t know this light, especially those who have stayed in the darkness because darkness is more amenable to doing what is wrong, we are not allowed to sit back and cast down a verdict upon them. It is our duty to go out and bring love to all our neighbors. It is worth remembering that Jesus did not say to let our light shine that people would hear our good *words* and praise God, but that they would see our good *works* and praise God.

That means it matters how we live our lives. It means everything we do conveys to others what the God we believe in is like. It means our lives should bear witness to truth, not just by living morally as an example, but by actually loving those around us. Servanthood and forgiveness—humble forgiveness, not the self-righteous kind—speak convincingly and truthfully. God has given us light. Let us share it with one another. Amen.

¹⁴ Romans 5:8 (*Revised Standard Version*).

¹⁵ Remembering here also the language of John 1:1-5.