

AFRAID OF THE LIGHT

Matthew 5.13-21

Epiphany V, February 5, 2017

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Matthew 5:13-16

¹³You 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. ¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

Afraid of the Light

I want to add my prayer to Pastor David's this morning that this community – this congregation – will not let its light go out.

As we have already heard this morning, there is a light here that is shining on racism and exclusion and the devastation of our environment.

There's a light here that shines on what it is that God requires of us: to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God.

There's a light here that shines on grace and hope and second chances.

I have been reminded this week that there is a light here that shines on the historic value of the separation of church and state. Being part of movements for justice and peace is one thing. Becoming the pawns of particular politicians is another.

There's a reason why our Baptist ancestor, Roger Williams, stood up against the required conformity of Puritan New England and created a home for people of all religious faiths and no religious faith.

There's a reason why the Baptist preacher and social activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., worked for social justice in this country but gave his ultimate loyalty to God alone.

There's a reason why the great German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose life was forever changed by the African-American community at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, stood up against the national church of his homeland – the Reich Church where people, in the name of nationalist Christianity, swore allegiance to Hitler.

God help us. There's a light we have to shine on tyranny and we can't let that light go out.

As Jesus said to that diverse group of people up on the mountain living in their own tyranny: "You are the light of the world."

There is a line from a Marianne Williamson quote that has been haunting me this week. She says: "It is our *light*, not our darkness that most frightens us."

I know what it is to be afraid of the dark.

When I was a kid, I had bouts of being afraid of the dark. In fact, I can remember one point when there had been some break-ins in our white suburban community outside Detroit and I couldn't sleep at night.

Some of that fear, I know now, was racist. We couldn't imagine that it was the white boys down the street that would do this kind of thing. It must be those menacing black folks from the city invading our homes and stealing our stuff.

It's not too far from the present fear we hear about Muslims even though, "between 2001 and 2015, more Americans were killed by homegrown right-wing extremists than by Islamic terrorists," including all the folks who died in 9/11.

Maybe we should be more concerned about what the white boys are up to down the street.

There is indeed a darkness that threatens us but it may not be the one we have been told to fear.

I didn't understand all that then. All I knew was that I was afraid of the dark.

My dad's remedy was to give me a flashlight so I could shine it around my room when I thought I saw something or heard something.

That was a very bad idea. There is a reason they use flashlights to tell ghost stories. The light just magnified the shadows and made them dance around my room so I was even more scared.

After several episodes of crying out for help, I heard my dad coming down the hall. He grabbed the flashlight, pulled the covers up to my neck, and said: "Now go to sleep!"

Well, how could I? I was paralyzed with fear. Thanks to that flashlight I was even more afraid of the dark.

Maybe that's part of our problem. We are afraid of the dark and all we have been doing is handing out flashlights.

Marianne Williamson suggests that: "It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us."

Some of you may know the whole passage:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

I know. It sounds a little too “up with people.” But it’s not that far from what Jesus is saying to that rag-tag bunch of folks on the mountain. You are more powerful than you know.

You who are poor in spirit are blessed.

You who know how to mourn the necessary losses of life;
you who are meek and merciful;

you who have a driving appetite for justice;

you who have an undivided heart and are peacemakers;

you who suffer persecution for righteousness sake;

You are the blessed ones. You are the light of the world so let your light shine that others may see your good works and glorify God in heaven.

You “were born,” Williamson says, “to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”

Why should we be afraid of that?

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says, “a city built on a hill, cannot be *hid*.”

Well, that’s a reason we might be afraid of the light. If what we really want is to hide; if we want to “shrink” as Marianne Williams says; if we don’t want to be on display or to be vulnerable. Being the “light of the world,” Jesus says, is to be like a city built on a hill that *cannot* be hid.

That’s the great beauty of these protest marches. People are willing to put themselves out there – to not be hid. It may be scary and it may feel vulnerable but that’s what the light of the world does.

And then Jesus says that the light is like a lamp and you don't hide a lamp under a bushel basket. You put it on a lampstand and it gives light to *everybody* in the house.

What could be so scary about that? Well, here's the thing about light. It's indiscriminate. We don't get to choose who gets to see it. It gives light to everyone. Later in Matthew 5, Jesus says: "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

We don't get to control the light. The light just shines. We can't manage what people do with it. We can't guarantee how people will receive it. We can't always focus it so that people will see what we want them to see. The light shines and it gives light to everyone.

So, Jesus says, "let your light shine that people can see your good works and glorify God who is in heaven."

Now this is really scary stuff. Let your light shine so that people can get a really good look at your work? Does that sound frightening to any of you? Sometimes I can be pretty guarded about my work. I don't want folks to look too closely. What if it's not good enough? What if I'm not really accomplishing anything? What if nobody appreciates all that I have done?

You can see why Marianne Williamson might be right to say that it is the *light* and not our darkness that most frightens us.

So I'm thinking today about people who really let their light shine – regardless of the vulnerability; regardless of how it might be taken; regardless of all those fears that their work might not be good enough.

And the life that comes to mind makes me hesitate because she is a "saint" now and it's so hard to see ourselves in that kind of light. But give it a shot this morning.

These words are attributed to her work with the poor and orphans in India:

*People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.*

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

*If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.
Be honest and sincere anyway.*

*What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.*

*Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.*

Or, as Jesus and Marianne Williamson might say:
It's getting darker out there. It might be scary.
Shine your light anyway.

We do not gather on a Sunday morning to pass out flashlights that just make the darkness more scary. We come together to re-ignite that light that is already within you; that is more powerful than you know; that shines in the world no matter how dark it gets.

Don't let that light go out.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

While the quote by Marianne Williamson has been sometimes attributed to Nelson Mandela, it actually appears in her *Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (Harper Collins, 1992), pp.190-191. The statistics about right-wing terrorists are noted in a report by *Vox* on-line at www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/1/25. The “Anyway” poem is reported to have been posted in Mother Theresa’s home for children; see www.prayerfoundation.org.