

Let There Be *Your* Light **MATTHEW 5:13-20**

There's an old tradition observed in some churches of giving a newly baptized person a candle, accompanied by some of the words from today's gospel: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see the good that you do and give glory to your Father in heaven." It's a good custom with some obvious symbolism, but it would be embarrassing if people in the congregation first looked expectant and then started saying, "But where's the light? Let it shine!" Oh, there's one thing I guess I forgot to mention. The candle that's given to the person should be *lit!*

If we count ourselves among Jesus disciples and think seriously about his statement to us that "You are the light of the world," we might wonder if we're going to be left in a position like that of the person standing at the front of the church with an unlit candle. Jesus' words are addressed to all of his disciples — the "you" there is plural — but they say something about each individual Christian. In some way, each one of us is to be part of a figurative light that provides discernment and guidance and wisdom for the world, a light that keeps the world from just stumbling around in the dark. And we wonder how we can do that. After all, we need discernment and wisdom and guidance ourselves. We need someone to give *us* light!

Exactly! It's just like the situation with that newly baptized person who has to be given not a bare candle, but a lighted one. We have to *receive* the light in order to *be* the light.

Fortunately, we don't have to look very far in the Bible to be told the source of the light that is given to us. If we turn from Matthew's gospel to John's, we find, in the eighth chapter, Jesus saying "*I am the light of the world.*" Not "you" this time, but "I." Jesus himself is the light. And it's significant that in the baptismal ceremony, the candle for the newly baptized person is lighted from a larger candle that represents the light of Christ. Christ is our light.

A little more searching of the scriptures will turn up a lot of references to light — physical light, of course, but also light used as a metaphor, as in our text today. It's a prominent theme in the scriptures. One especially important passage is in the 49th chapter of Isaiah in one of the songs about the servant of the Lord: "I will give **you** as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." God is the one who sends his servant to be light for the world.

Studying all these biblical uses of light imagery — and there are many more — can be very interesting. We could look at the ways in which the image is used in different places in the Bible and the connections between one text and another.

[Type here]

But instead of going in that direction, we really ought to return to our text from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. We would be missing the point of Jesus' words if we were just to use them to start an interesting study of the theme of light in the Bible.

If we really believe in Jesus, then we are, Jesus says, light. That is simply a consequence of having received the light of Christ. But there's a command that goes with that statement of fact: Don't hide your light under a basket. "Let your light shine before others." The light is not really the light *of the world* if it's hidden *from* the world.

So how are we to let our light shine? Jesus is quite clear about that. Our light shines before others when they "see the good that you do and give glory to your Father in heaven." The world is to be illuminated by what Jesus' followers do in the world — by the good that they do.

Christians through the centuries have spent a lot of time and energy debating the role of faith and good works in salvation. But that isn't the issue here. We aren't saved by doing good works; it's by the grace of God in Jesus Christ that we receive salvation by faith. God doesn't need our good works in order to save us. But our neighbor does need them.

The world needs the good works of Christians — and not just as a helping hand when things happen to be going badly. The world needs the light of Christ if it's not to be left in spiritual darkness.

This is not a matter of “deeds, but creeds.” In order to be reconciled with God, people need to hear that God brings about this reconciliation through the cross of Christ. And if that's to make sense to people, they need to know what Christians believe. Witnessing to our faith in words as well as actions is important, and in fact is part of the “good work” we are called to do. But too often Christian “witnessing” becomes a matter of answering questions that people haven't asked.

If people are going to be interested in what we have to say, we have to show that we really care about their welfare and that of all God's creation. But works of mercy — feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and other things — aren't to be done just to soften people up so they'll listen to what we have to say! Those things are to be done for their own sake because God wants people who are in need to be helped. Caring or not caring for people in need is what distinguishes between the sheep and the goats in the parable of the Last Judgment later in Matthew. And whether or not the people we help, the oppressed for whom we speak or the discouraged we try to cheer up actually glorify our Father in heaven is up to God.

When it comes to talking to people about the Christian faith, we need first to pay attention to what their own problems and concerns are. Some may be

[Type here]

facing health problems or aging and the realization of their own mortality. Others have a sense of guilt for specific things they've done or for the way they've lived their whole lives and are looking for forgiveness and acceptance. And many people in today's world, in which scientific developments have swept away a lot of traditional beliefs, are left wondering if there's any meaning or purpose to life in this vast and ancient universe.

The gospel has something to say to all of these concerns. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus means that there is hope — not hope that we will avoid death but hope in spite of death. The whole ministry of Jesus is marked by his welcoming of sinners and announcing the forgiveness of sins. His message from the very beginning of his ministry was that the reign of God was near, and the Bible tells us that God's goal for the whole creation is for it to be united in fellowship with Christ.

Indeed, Christ is the answer! But Christ has to be presented in a way that addresses the questions and needs of each person. Saying that Jesus is the friend of sinners and telling of your own feeling of forgiveness and acceptance may resonate with a person, but if she has just gotten a diagnosis of inoperable cancer, it probably won't speak to her deepest fears. St. Paul said that he had "become all things to all people" in order to win some to Christ. We can learn something from that.

And with all of this, letting your light shine before others doesn't mean that it's your job to save them. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Again, whether

[Type here]

or not people to whom we witness respond in a positive way is not under our control. God will deal with it.

You are the light of the world — because you have been given the light of Christ. So, in all that you do in word and deed, Let your light shine!!!!

Amen!!