

BE THE LIGHT
Matthew 5:13-20
February 5, 2017
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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"You are the light in my dark world/You are the fire that will always burn/O how you shine when everything seems hopeless/you know how to help me/When I can't stand on my own - You are the light - you are fire that will always burn."

Maria McKee sings - belting out the truth that columnist Parker Palmer writes: "In times of deep darkness, we not only need light - we need to *be* light for one another."ⁱⁱ You are the light - I am the light - we are the light in our dark world.

We are the light - and each of us needs the light of one another to move forward in the darkness. Palmer says that "there are many kinds of light. There's the light that allows people lost in the dark to find their way home. There's the light of truth-telling about ourselves that allows us to see what we are doing - or allowing - that has helped bring this darkness upon us. There's the light that shows us the way forward toward a better world. There's the light of courage to walk that path no matter who says "Stop!" . . . No one of us can provide all of the light we need. But every one of us can shed some kind of light. Every day we can ask ourselves, "What kind of light can I provide today?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus asks that same question of the disciples in our morning reading from Matthew. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all I in the house . . . Let your light shine before others . . ." Recall from our discussion of the Beatitudes last week that in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching the disciples how to recognize and be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Beatitudes are touchstones to help them know the Kingdom when they see it - when they find someone living its truth. In our reading today which directly follows the Beatitudes, Jesus moves beyond asking us as disciples to simply recognize the Kingdom - in today's reading Jesus pointedly tells us that we are the light of the world. He does not ask us if we *want* to be the light of the world. It does not ask us if it is *convenient* that we shine light for others. He really doesn't care even if we are afraid to be the light of the world. He simply tells us to shine. He tells us to let our light shine in those places we find the Kingdom of God - with those who mourn - with the poor in spirit - with the peacemakers. Jesus tells us to let our light shine with them.

Martin Niemoller was a popular preacher in Germany during the rise of Hitler. He began his ministry actually supporting Hitler, but soon grew to oppose him because of Hitler's anti-church laws - ministers were prohibited from preaching offending messages - the church was expected to promulgate state policy. In his ministry, Niemoller let his light shine. We know him best from a quote which is attributed to him:

“THEY CAME FIRST for the Communist,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
THEN THEY CAME for the trade unionists,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
THEN THEY CAME for me,
And by that time no one was left to speak up.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Niemoller's questioning of his own inaction - his own failure to let his light shine as brightly as it might - has helped countless individuals question their actions - and ponder how brightly they have shown their light.

Not long before he was arrested in 1936 and sent to a concentration camp, Niemoller preached on the same text from Matthew we read this morning. At the beginning of his sermon he read names for five minutes - they were the names of those who had been forbidden to speak, evicted or arrested by the Nazi authorities. He then preached, “When I read out the names . . . did we not think: Alas and alack, will this wind, this storm, that is going through the world just now, not blow out the Gospel candle? We must . . . take [the light] out of the storm and put it in a safe nook. --- Niemoller answers his question - “Away with the bushel basket! The light should be placed upon a candlestick! We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is God's concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away.”^{iv}

Like Jesus - he did not want members of his congregation to put a bushel basket over the lamps they had just turned on. Frederick Buechner says it this way: “Jesus calls us to show this truth forth, live this truth forth. Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. This is what Jesus tells the disciples to be. This is what Jesus tells his church, tells us, to be and do. Love each other. Heal

the sick, he says. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons. That is what loving each other means.”^v

Every one of us is the light of the world. Every one of us can take the basket off our light. Every one of us can shine our lights - they may shine in many and different places - but let shine them and shine them brightly. After all, Jesus told us - We are the light of the world. Let us shine, Let us shine, Let us shine! Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Parker Palmer, *OnBeing*, Dec. 2014.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow, Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*, p.87.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Frederick Buechner, *Clown in the Belfry*.