

## Ruining the Darkness

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 5A

Matthew 5:13-20

Several years ago my sister, father, and I started giving my mother a hard time because she suddenly became very particular about how dark it had to be for her to go to sleep. It had to be completely, 100% pitch black, and if somewhere there was the littlest light shining—maybe the dull glow from a streetlight outside the window, maybe from an alarm clock beside the bed—she would not be able to fall asleep. She would lie there awake, irritated by the light. She even got so dependent on having utter darkness whenever it was bedtime that she started to travel with a roll of electrical tape in her toiletry bag. When they'd turn off the main lights of some hotel room, inevitably there would be other smaller lights around the room still shining. Little light on the thermostat? She'd slice off a piece of electrical tape and cover it up. Little light emanating from some device in the bathroom? Slice off another piece of electrical tape and slap it on there. It was like a little bed time ritual, one in which she discovered how difficult it actually is to control the amount of light when it is supposed to be dark.

You can imagine how awful we felt later when we realized that she had developed quite a serious eye condition that left her extremely sensitive to light. And you can imagine how silly I feel now that I have somehow developed a similar nightly ritual. I don't have an eye condition, but for some reason I, too, need as little light as possible. In fact, there are some nights I don't get good sleep and I'm convinced it is because there is this little teeny weeny green light on our printer and it is keeping me awake. Mind you, the little light is about the size of the head of a pin, and it sits on our desk about 5 feet away from our bed, but when I wake up in the middle of the night it IS THIS BRIGHT. I've made a special cover for it, not out of electrical tape, but out of black construction paper, and when someone prints something it often knocks that paper out of the way. You think I'm crazy, but that teeny tiny green light ruins the darkness.

"You are the teeny tiny green light that will ruin the darkness," Jesus tells his disciples. It's a good thing to say, and the right time for him to say it. Jesus has just begun what many consider his most thorough, most important teaching about the kingdom of God and it's totally imaginable that they're starting to get a bit overwhelmed by the sound of it all. He has come on strong, even mentioning right up front the fact that they may face some persecution, some blowback, for their beliefs and their works of mercy. And so now he gives them an idea about how special and important and influential their witness will be. Like a city situated up on a hill that stands visible for all those in the valleys and hillsides, like a candle set on a table in a room at night that enables people finish their work, like the small bit of salt that flavors the dish it is in, they will have an effect on the world around them. And even if someone walks around with electrical tape, they will prove by their very presence that it is actually very easy to banish the darkness.

Light is difficult to control. Just a little teeny tiny bit can make a huge difference. In a time long before people knew the physics of light—that it had characteristics of both a particle and a wave—Jesus is telling them that their very actions in Christ's name will be mysteriously explosive, impossible to shut away. As little photons of good in a world of evil, disciples could beam and bounce off of others and transmit holy energy to them, and like a wave their actions could reach distances far beyond the distance their legs could ever take them, like when a prayer shawl stitched here warms a person in a

hospital on the other side of town. And long before anyone knew the chemistry of salt—that it is a stable compound with positive and negative ions (polar opposites!) which allow it to dissolve and spread into a larger surrounding substance—Jesus is telling them that although they might be small and pretty ordinary-looking and totally different from each other they would be able to season and enrich an entire community, like when a church’s stained glass window brings joy to thousands of people driving up and down a city street at night. The church I serve has a window like this, and people I bump into in public often tell me how much they love that window. Incidentally, this particular scripture is what one architect used as he presented his initial ideas to our building Team back as the congregation contemplated its new addition.

It’s important to recognize, however, that Jesus is not just lecturing on the power of positive change, or the benefit of spreading random acts of kindness. Those things are nice, but Jesus is talking about something more serious here. By calling them salt and light, Jesus gearing up his followers to understand they will represent to the world the true life of the kingdom of God. Jesus says that he is the fulfillment of the law, the culmination of all that God desired to teach and convey through the giving of the law and the words of the prophets in the days of ancient Israel. When Christ lives in them through faith, they will display that fulfillment of God’s desires for the world through their own words and actions. That is perhaps why for so long the first thing said to a new daughter or son of Christ after they pass through the waters of baptism is, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

However, as important as your one teeny tiny green light is, be it yours or mine, Jesus is actually not speaking about individual lights here. He is speaking to his disciples as a group, as a community. Each time he uses the word “you” in this passage, he is actually using the plural form of that word, which we don’t have in English...unless, of course, you live in the South, where I do. He is saying, “Y’all are the salt of the earth. Y’all are the light of the world. Let y’all’s light so shine before others.” In other words, it is not each person’s ability to shine that Jesus is focusing on, but their power as a collective.

I think this can be especially challenging for Americans to remember, for we tend to be really fascinated by the power of the individual. We love stories where one person makes a difference. We call them luminaries, and they are gifts from God. But the reality is that not just here but elsewhere in the gospels Jesus seems far more concerned about the impact his followers have when they function as a group.

Early church historian Robert Louis Wilken drives this home in his book about the first thousand years of Christianity, the years from Jesus’ death and resurrection to about A.D. 1000. The communal aspect of Christian faith cannot be overstated during these years, especially because their faith was being formed in a time of great persecution, when it was often a death sentence to be identified as a follower of the risen Lord. “The early Church,” he says, “was a community with a distinct anatomy; it was not simply an aggregate of individuals who believed the same things.”<sup>[1]</sup> It came into existence, he says at another point, as a community, not as a bunch of individuals. That is to say, the first Christians would have a very difficult time with the modern understanding some seem to have that someone can be a follower of Christ apart from the church. In fact, Jesus doesn’t even seem to make much room for that understanding, either.

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<sup>[1]</sup> *The First Thousand Years*. Robert Louis Wilken. Yale University Press, 2012. p 35

In my tradition, we say that baptism and faith make a person part of a body—the church’s anatomy—and that body, and the way it moved and functioned together, was what had the quality of light. By the power of the Holy Spirit the disciples of Christ learned to work together to display the love of Christ, to share their bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into their houses, to cover the naked, to offer their lives for the sake of others...and when they did so their light broke forth like the dawn.

It seems to have been this “y’all” characteristic of discipleship that led Christians to create the first hospitals the world had ever known of. In ancient Greece and Rome, when people worshipped many different gods and goddesses, people who were sick used to go and sleep in the temples of certain gods with the hopes they would be healed. Within the first few hundred years of its existence, the church transformed that trend. Bishops and other leaders designed and built structures where the sick could come and be tended to. They trained people that we would come to call doctors and nurses to take care of the sick because that is what they had known Jesus to do. The earliest hospitals were, of course, very rudimentary, but they were no doubt a new kind of salt for the earth.

It is this y’all characteristic that still attracts attention today. One of my colleagues who went to high school with me is an ordained Episcopal priest down in Waco, Texas. We’re only really in touch through Facebook these days, but I found out that my friend was invited to participate in a very rare experience a couple of years ago. Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, who was until recently a self-described atheist, scheduled a meeting with the pastors in Waco. Apparently Mark Zuckerberg just wanted to listen to what pastors had to say, and he was especially keen on hearing what the pastors said about the communities they served—what was important to them, how they functioned. In an article about the meeting, my colleague said you could have knocked him over with a feather. The pastors apparently had no idea they were going to be interviewed by such an influential person. Zuckerberg, who practically invented the concept of social media and who has made it the force it is today for connecting people and spreading information, suddenly seems to want to learn from pastors of small congregations what is really important to communities and how they work together?<sup>[2]</sup> It almost makes you wonder if someone might be seeing our light.

In these tense times when it seems there is so much that wants to pull people apart, when there are clear, competing visions and desires for what our human communities and even our country wants to be, the light of Christ evident through the church is especially important. We can even disagree about political and social issues of our time in the church—like positive and negative ions that mysteriously still work together—because ultimately it is the truth of the cross that illuminates our lives. It draws us together, pulls us in to its forgiving and cleansing center, telling us that we aren’t just a bunch of “yous,” but one great big y’all. It draws us in and reminds us that there is something in our witness that can shine, that we exist as that one community in the world which by its very presence reminds the world that God loves it, cares for it, has died for it so that it may truly live. That is flavor, my friends. That is some kind of seasoning.

And even when we feel dim and ineffectual, when our conflict wears us down and we’re ever aware of our shortcomings, when the gloom of the world around us is really, really overpowering, Jesus will remind us again that all it takes to ruin the darkness it is a teeny tiny green light.

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<sup>[2]</sup> <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/current/why-mark-zuckerbergs-meeting-pastors-so-significant>

Thanks be to God!

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