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## The Light of the World

The Gospel reading that Donna-Marie read for us today is particularly appropriate for this season of Epiphany, the season of light. The season of lengthening days in the natural world—when I get up in the morning now there's actually a little light in the sky; and this season in the church when we reflect on Jesus as the Light of the World, and deepen our awareness of Jesus' identity.

Notice, though, that in today's reading Jesus, the Light of the World, says that *we* are the light of the world, and then commands us to let our light shine before all the world. So which is it then: is Jesus the Light of the World, or are we; or are we somehow both the light of the world?

We'll come back to that question.

This week, as usual, I turned to my teacher and mentor Will Willimon's commentary on the Gospel text, and I have to say that I found the experience to be particularly enlightening. Willimon's commentary was illuminating in the sense that it helped me to see some things that I haven't been seeing as well as I should have; and it shed some light on how I've been thinking about the path forward for us as a church.

But to start with this question about the light of the world—about Jesus as the light of the world and us as the light of the world. Willimon cites a sermon by Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, in which Thomas says that we are more like the moon than the sun. Our light is a reflected light; as Christians, we reflect the light of Jesus.

There are other ways of thinking about this, of course, but this analogy helps keep us focussed on Jesus. It's not just any light that shines from us; it's not a generic enlightenment that we seek, but a particular way of shining in the world. I said in the sermon last week that our calling as Christians is to show the world what God is like.

As Christians we show the world a particular face of God: God as revealed by Jesus, the God who meets us at the cross, God who takes on flesh, and dwells with us, sharing all aspects of our humanity.

So Jesus says, You are the light of the world. Don't hide your light, but let it shine. Let it shine before others, so that they see the good you do, and give glory to God in heaven. Show the world what God is like by what you do.

One of the things that Willimon points out in his commentary is that we

preachers often mishear Jesus. Instead of preaching like Jesus does—You are the light of the world—we often instead preach something like, You *ought to be* the light of the world. You *should be* the light of the world.

Instead of following Jesus' example and correctly naming who you are, and calling forth your very best, too often our preaching becomes something of a harangue, a series of "shoulds" and "oughts," a naming of all that is wrong or deficient in your faith lives or in our church life.

I know that I do this at times. I focus on what I think is wrong or deficient or missing. Now, if it's any consolation, know that I don't just do this in my preaching or in my vocational life; I do it in the rest of my life, too, and I do it with myself as much as I do it with others.

But this is not what Jesus does. Willimon uses the example of parenting. He says if your child misbehaves, you don't say, Look if you have any hope of becoming my child, you'd better straighten up. No—instead you say, You are my child, I want the best for you, and I will love you no matter what. Now go and be your best self. This is what God in Jesus says to us.

It's the difference of course between conditional and unconditional love. We don't have to earn God's love; we're not at risk of losing God's love. It's there for us, foundational for our lives. Like the love of a parent ought to be, but sometimes isn't. God's love for

us is unconditional. But to say that God loves us unconditionally does not mean that God's love comes without any kind of expectation. We don't have to earn it, and we're not going to lose it, but we are expected to do something with it.

That's the part about being your best self, or as Jesus says, letting your light shine before others. God's love for us is not a private gift for us to hoard; it's a lavish gift, generously poured out, and meant for us to share widely. Because God wants to use us to set the world right.

So let me say this to you: You are the light of the world. You are the ones God has chosen to bring peace to a world at war; to bring hope to those who despair; to feed those who are hungry; to befriend those who are lonely; to be a light in the darkness; to be a spark of vitality in the dullness. You.

Sometimes things get in the way of our shining. Our light gets hidden under one or another bushel basket. At times the bushel basket is our own blindness, our focus on the wrong things, or our self-doubt. So when you hear that God has chosen you to set the world right, some of you may be tempted to think like I do sometimes, and say, Me? Us? How can it be? We aren't rich enough, or strong enough, or numerous enough, or young enough, to do what God expects of us. But Jesus would tell you and I that we're wrong when we think like that.

Forgive me for the times when I have failed to see you as Jesus sees you. I pray for better vision.

Hear it again: You are the light of the world. God has chosen you to set the world right: by welcoming refugees, and visiting in hospitals, and honouring the presence of children in our midst, and standing in vigil with our Muslim sisters and brothers last Monday; by speaking out, and writing letters, on social and political and economic and environmental issues that demand a Christian response. You are letting your light shine when you do these things.

Another bushel basket that can hide our light is getting bogged down in conflicts that keep us internally focussed. We've been there at times in our history. We need to ensure that we are doing our best at all times to be a healthy community, so that conflicts don't keep us from being focussed on an outward-facing mission. The clearer we are about our mission in the world, the more we experience ourselves as salt and light and a source of vitality; and the more the world around us will see us that way, too.

This past week I had some planning meetings with our staff and our lay leaders, and I can tell you that there are some great initiatives afoot, that you will hear more about in the coming months. Ways in which we will let our light shine, and show the world what God is like.

A third bushel basket that can hide our light is our fantasy of what a perfect church should be. Maybe it's a

church that we remember from the past, even this church in the past; or maybe it's in our minds as a vision of what things *ought* to be like. That's another one that I'll confess to.

But again, Jesus says, You are the light of the world. Now. Present tense. You are the ones God has chosen to set the world right. And you are already doing it. So keep doing it. Keep letting your light shine. Keep showing the world what God is like. There is no better mark of what a perfect church should be, than one in which the hungry are fed, the lonely are befriended, the stranger is welcomed, hearts are transformed, love is shared, bread is broken, and Jesus is seen among us—the Light of the World who calls us all to shine. Amen.

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