

Series: Lessons from the Common Lectionary

Today: Let It Shine

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

**A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, February 6, 2011
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

*Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

Brynn Hackett sang a much more contemporary version of that song just a minute ago, but you may not have recognized it. It is a song that many of us have sung in our youth: at a retreat; or at summer camp; perhaps when you were in Sunday school; maybe you even taught it to a Sunday school class. It is an easy song to teach, and it is an easy song to learn. However, I wonder if when we learned or taught it if we fully understood what we were singing or why we were teaching it.

Jesus said, *"You are the light of the world."* He said it in the context of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. He had just finished giving his followers his agenda for ministry; the things they must do if they want to experience the blessing of God. We call those principles the Beatitudes; the Blessings. At the end of that segment of his sermon, he changes the focus and says something which should get our attention if we want to be serious about following in the footsteps of Jesus. He no longer speaks about the people we do not know, but he speaks to the people who are listening. This is personal; not global. *"Blessed are you!"*

"Blessed are you!" he tells us, when you are persecuted for what you believe; when you mean what you say and say what you mean; when your words and your actions make people uncomfortable

because of your consistency when we are surrounded by people whose words and actions are so terribly inconsistent. *“Blessed are you!” he says.*

Then he comes to the words which are the focus of my message for the morning: **YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH. YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.**

When we choose to follow Jesus, he does not urge us to be salt and light. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be defined as salt and light. It is not a matter of choice. Who you are and what you do will either add flavor to life, or it won't. Who you are and what you do will either bring light to the dark corners of our world, or I will contribute to the darkness. You are either in or you are out. Either you are part of the solution, or you have become part of the problem. There is no sitting on the fence. The choice is yours. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world, or you are not.

Last weekend, during our officer's retreat, we took a hard look at where we are a church entering our 269th year. We wrestled with the fact that our membership rolls have not grown as we had hoped. We took a careful look at all the numbers; our membership records, our attendance records, and the involvement of our people, and it dawned on me that as we examined all the numbers and did some serious thinking about our future, what we need is a new paradigm for this old, well established church. The good news is that we don't have to be afraid of thinking about a new paradigm. This church has undergone transformation many times in its history or it would not be the church it is today, but the challenges we face in the 21st century make it even more imperative that we change our way of thinking about who we are and what we do.

A paradigm is a dominant pattern of thought which defines the way we look at the world. Businesses have learned that if they don't change their paradigms on a regular basis, they will likely go out of business, and the church needs to do the same.

Let me give you an example. My father died 30 years ago this year. He had spent his whole life as a telephone man, and he was proud of his 46 year career with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). Today, the company he worked for all his life no longer exists as it did when my Dad worked there. AT&T was in the telephone business, but the leaders of AT&T knew that if they remained in the telephone business they would eventually go out of business. So they changed their paradigm. I think it actually contributed to my father's early demise at age 64 because all he knew was the telephone business, and they were asking him to see what he was doing not as telephones, but as communications. (Of course, two packs of cigarettes a day and too many cocktails in the evening didn't contribute to good health, either.)

They were no longer in the telephone business. They were in the communications business. Today, what is left of AT&T doesn't even deal with land lines. They are involved with cell phones, internet communications, television, and other forms of communication.

A church that is 269 years old has changed many times in order to survive, so this morning I want to suggest that our new paradigm be the paradigm by which Jesus defined his disciples: *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.* Imagine the difference a few tablespoons of salt makes in a pound of meatloaf. Imagine the difference this little pen light makes in a darkened parking lot. Salt brings out the flavor; light chases away the darkness.

The majority of this congregation has matured in a time when they have seen the church at its zenith in terms of church membership, activity and mission. Now we live in a time when the church no longer carries the influence it once had in the lives of our culture. People still need the church for birth, marriage and death, but in terms of shaping how we view our lives, we have lost influence in the current culture. And I wonder if it has to do with the paradigm by which we define ourselves.

For decades we have defined ourselves as a club to which those who are accepted into membership can belong. Some people actually send their gifts for the year to me with a note telling me that this is their “dues payment” for the year. In this club, we come together every week and talk with each other about the love of God and the saving act of love in Jesus Christ. However, for too many of us that conversation ends at the door. Our critics tell us that our lives do not reflect what we say we believe.

The paradigm of the church in the past has been a clubhouse where we take care of ourselves. We don't want to rock the boat or make anyone upset. We feed the sheep. We pat the sheep. Occasionally we even shear the sheep. However, we don't do all that well when it comes to multiplying the herd. We are content to let it grow older, and one day we may discover that we have passed the point of being able to replicate what Jesus calls us to do because there just aren't enough of us to do it.

If we are to thrive in the 21st century, I suggest to you that we change the paradigm from clubhouse to mission station. We need to see ourselves as missionaries for Jesus Christ in a world that has become distrustful of that message. Missionaries are people who are willing to invest their lives in a culture of people; who earn the right to be heard through acts of practical and charitable service; and when they are asked why they do what they do, they are bold to share their faith in a God of loving purpose who has proved the depth of that love in life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

William Willimon tells of his experience of reaching the generation we want to reach as a church when he was chaplain at Duke University; that 20-30 something crowd who just doesn't have church on their priority list of things to be involved in. He says that he believes that young people today desperate for light; for something grand and wonderful they can give their lives for. He used as an example a chapel service where he invited a recruiter from *Teach For America* to come and speak. *Teach For America* is a program that attempts to recruit bright, young, prospective teachers from college and university campuses to teach in America's most difficult schools.

To an auditorium full of Duke students, the recruiter said, *“Looking at you tonight, I don’t know why I am here. You are privileged, the beneficiaries of the best of this nation’s educational resources. I can tell, just by looking at you, that you are all bound for Wall Street, or med school, or law school. And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year in some of the worst school situations in America. Here I stand, asking you to waste your life for a bunch of ungrateful kids in the backwoods of Appalachia or in the inner city of Philadelphia. What was I thinking?”*

Nevertheless, I do have some literature up here, and I would be willing to talk to anybody who happens to be interested. Yet I know, just by looking at you, that all of you want to be successful in life, and here I am inviting you to be failures. Dr. Willimon, I am afraid I may have wasted your time. That is all I really have to say, but if by chance somebody here feels called to do the worst job any of you can imagine, then I am here to talk with you.”

Willimon says that with that, everyone stood up and stampeded to the front of the chapel; fighting for a chance to talk to this recruiter, just dying to give their lives to something more interesting than American success; dying to give themselves to something bigger and more important than themselves.

Friends, I love this church. I have committed the last 15 years of my life to help it be the best that it can be, but I am telling you today: we need to change our paradigm. This isn’t a clubhouse. This is a mission station. We aren’t in business to take care of each other. We are in business to share what we have received from God with others who have not experienced it.

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If we are searching for a new paradigm, maybe this old one of Jesus would do nicely. And if we weary of our responsibility, perhaps we can remember the words he said to us around this table: *My body, broken for you. My blood; shed for you.*

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine