

"Light of the World"

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, fill us with your Holy Spirit and enlighten us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

A young boy walked along a country lane one dark night with his father, who carried a lantern. The black silence all about them frightened the boy. He said, "Father, this light reaches such a little way, I'm afraid." His father answered, "True, but if you walk on, the light will shine to the end of your journey." Sometimes God only enlightens our next step. But that's all we need. For, if we walk on, God will continue to enlighten us to the end of our journey.

Our gospel reading today serves as a transition from the Beatitudes to Jesus' instructions in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins with three metaphors which describe the mission of his disciples and how they're useless if they don't fulfill their calling as disciples. First, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste ... it is no longer good for anything." Salt was very important in Jesus' time: to enhance the flavour of food as it does today; to preserve food like salted fish; to ritually purify items; and to symbolize the act of covenant. Figuratively, the metaphor suggests that the disciples must bring a distinct spiritual flavour to the people that will sustain and preserve them, with the purity of God acting in them consistent with the original covenants between God and the Israelites. If the disciples don't change people, they're useless: as useless as salt that is not salty.

Second, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." A city on a hill can be seen by everyone and cannot be hidden. Like a

lighthouse near a rocky shore, the disciples' mission is to be a light for the world and they must be seen by everyone, even if everyone doesn't appreciate their presence or message. If the disciples are not seen, they're useless.

The city on a hill metaphor is quickly followed by the third important metaphor, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and gives light to all in the house." While a lighthouse is meant to be seen, most of the time, a light is to illuminate other things for us to see. Even a little light can illuminate a dark house. The disciples are to enlighten others by doing good works and preaching the gospel. If the disciples don't enlighten the lives of others, they're useless: useless as a light under a bushel basket.

The last part of the reading affirms that Jesus does not want to change a single letter of the Hebrew Bible – in the King James Version it says by one jot or tittle. A jot is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet and a tittle is a minute stroke that can distinguish one letter from another. Jesus is confronting the rigid, legalistic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible by the scribes and the Pharisees; not the Bible itself. Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies in the Bible, not changing or abolishing it.

Reverend Chris Levan told an enlightening story during a United Church webinar that his father Victor Levan told him just before he died. Victor was a minister and in 1950, he tried to host community meetings at the church to foster discussion about faith and ultimately to grow membership at the church. The initial meeting was on a dark evening in late February. It was well attended and included quite a number of young university students and Victor was optimistic about getting people engaged and getting them to join the church. Just as the discussion began, a woman

arrived late and asked if she could come in and she was, of course, welcomed to join the group.

After wrestling with issues of the church and church doctrine for nine months, Victor looked at each person gathered and asked them whether they would like to join the church. All of the university students had been quite keenly engaged in the discussions, but they all declined. After all of that effort, the meetings seemed to be a failure. The woman who had arrived late though, agreed to keep coming to the church and she soon became involved in the women's group and helping in the kitchen.

Many years later, on the day before Victor was to retire, the woman approached him outside of the church and asked if he remembered the day that she had first come to the church. "Of course," he said, "it was for the first of those meetings that didn't work very well." The woman continued, "That night, my husband had beat me; he's a drunkard and I didn't know what I could do. My children were acting out; I'd got a phone call from the high school and I didn't know what I would do with them. I didn't have any food in the house because my husband had drank all of our grocery money and I was so fed up, I ran out of the house and I was heading down the street to throw myself in the river and I walked by this building (and there she pointed to the building) and I saw a light in that upper story and I said to myself, 'OK God, I'll give you another chance.'" The little light saved that woman's life.

It's often God's work in the little things that make big changes in people's lives: a kind word, a hug, a phone call, a little light shining out of a church window, the shining of our own little lights.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu told his story in Craig and Marc Kielburger's inspiring book *Me to We*, that I read last week in Cuba. Archbishop Tutu says that "At a tender age I discovered that it isn't doing spectacular things

that makes you remarkable in the eyes of God, but instead, it is when you light just one candle to dispel a little bit of darkness that you are doing something tremendous. And if, as a global people, we put all the little bits of good together, we will overwhelm the world.”

We go out into the world where the darkness is and walk through it, one step at a time, like little candles. The disciples were not, and we are not, challenged to try harder to be salt or light. We are already the salt of the earth and light to the world. We’re encouraged by Jesus to enlighten others by the grace of God, and to live in the reality of God’s love for us. We are the light of the world! Let our little lights shine! Thanks be to God. Amen.