

“Let Light Shine Out of Darkness”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

New Testament lesson: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

The British writer and humorist Max Beerbohm has a story called “The Happy Hypocrite.” It’s a sort of parable, a story with a lesson. The main character is a notoriously self-centered individual, named Lord George. After many years of overindulgence in pleasures of the flesh, Lord George is a wreck of a man – as can be seen most clearly in his face, which is bloated and unhealthy looking.

Something happens one day that changes his life forever. He sees a beautiful young woman and falls in love. With only the best and purest intentions, he wants to ask her to marry him. But he knows she would never accept if she knew what he really was like.

So Lord George puts the mask of a saint over his face to hide the effects of years of sinful living. As far as anyone knows, he is a kind and virtuous man. He courts the young woman and marries her. They live happily together. That is, until a woman shows up from his past. She’s not fooled by the mask. She knows the man underneath it (or thinks she does).

One day, in the presence of George’s wife, she confronts him and tears off his mask, expecting to reveal the bloated, pockmarked face of the old degenerate. What she reveals is something quite different. The mask was magical. Behind the mask of a saint is now the face of a true saint – the saint Lord George has become, by wearing the mask.

In today’s New Testament lesson, the Apostle Paul says this to the Christians of Corinth who are wondering why more people don’t join them in their belief and commitment in Christ – he says:

For it is the God who said “Let light shine out of darkness” who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In other words, he tells the Corinthians that, yes, there are those who don’t see the light of Christ amid the darkness of this world. But that is not a direct failing of the church or the community of faith, as long as we let the light of Christ’s face shine in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.

Our calling is to shine the light of Christ into an otherwise darkened world, just like Lord George’s face shone as a saint when he turned his heart toward love – the divine, altruistic love embodied by Jesus. What’s that mean for us? Two things. First, there are people who are blinded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a resulting love and appreciation for the church and all it offers.

Paul says, “In their case the god (little “g”) of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers.” The world does not want those who have yet to believe to see the light of the gospel of Christ. The world is actually working against that – blinding people from seeing the truth of God.

That’s first – people are actively blinded from seeing God by a world that denies divine truth.

Second, God sent Jesus to shine light out of that darkness. Notice that Jesus is not standing apart from the world and shining light into the darkness. No! He is standing amid the darkness – surrounded by the darkness – and shining his light out of the darkness, to overcome it. This means that we can’t sit here in the Sanctuary all shiny from our love of God and faith in Jesus and expect to make any difference out there.

To make a difference in bringing more people to Christ, we as a church and as individual Christians need to go to the places of darkness Paul talks about. We need to shine the light of Christ out of that darkness, by letting people see who we are as followers of Jesus, see the face of Christ shining in our hearts.

How do you do that? You do that by being who you already are when you actively reach out in ministry -or in Scouting- to the community, to your family and friends, and especially to the strangers you meet. Or by changing who you are when you’re not reaching out to others on behalf of Christ and inviting them to join you in the community of faith.

We need to not only continue our outreach ministry as a church, but we need to refine it and enhance it, continually, as an ongoing mission. The church is up against a world that thinks it has no time for worship, no interest in Christian Education, and no energy for mission outreach; no money for the poor; no compassion for the sick and lonely, at least not as it should, as it could, if more agency and institutions and leaders embodied the light of Christ. We need more saints and fewer degenerates.

That’s what the church is up against – a world that can’t see the light of Christ amid the darkness of too many self-centered people and institutions that have little or no regard for others.

That’s the bad news. The good news is we have the ability to shine light out of that darkness for all the world to see – by being faithful to Jesus in all that we say and do.

There’s a church that presents Bibles to the third-graders, at which time the child recites a passage of Scripture. On one occasion, everything was going well until the minister came to one little boy who couldn’t remember his name, much less a Bible verse. The little boy’s eyes frantically searched for his mother, who was seated upfront. When he finally spotted her, he was relieved to see her whispering, “I am the light of the world,” to which he immediately shouted, “My mother is the light of the world.”

The good news is we have the ability to shine light out of the darkness. Even better news is that God has already won the battle. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” That’s from John 1, where he says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,” can never extinguish it (NLV).

As the church, we worry that the light of Christ seems to be less bright than it was in the past – when this sanctuary was full and the large doors here were raised for overflow seating in the Parlour. We worry that 80% of mainline churches are in decline. That’s natural, and to some degree necessary. But worrying is not the answer. The answer is recognizing that we live in a world where, as Paul said of his day, too, many are kept from seeing the light of the gospel of Christ. It was true in Paul’s day and it is true today – many people just don’t get it, can’t see it, don’t experience it. And yet, here we are 2,000 years after Paul. The darkness did not overcome the light of Christ then, and it will not overcome the light of Christ now, not ever!

So, let us continue to take heart and be encouraged. This church has so many wonderful things going on right now, so many new things just around the corner, not the least of which is living into our new mission statement to be *In Service to All God’s Children and Their Families*.

If we do that – continue to shape all that we do, all that we are, around that common mission statement, and share it with everyone we meet, saying “Hey, want to hear my church’s new Mission Statement? We’re a church *In Service to All God’s Children and Their Families*, through our Sunday school, through our mission outreach, through our midweek Children’s and Youth Program (LOGOS), through our small groups and through congregational care...”

... If we focus all we do around that Mission Statement and share it with others, then the light of Christ can’t help but shine brighter and brighter through this church out into a darkened world.

So fear not. Those living in darkness will, as the Prophet Isaiah declared, see a great light, the light of Jesus, shining in our hearts, calling them to worship and ministry alongside us. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, today we simply come in gratitude. We pause to thank you for your provision, your care.

We do not take for granted the gift of home and food.

We are so grateful for the love of family and community.

We are thankful for this beautiful place to gather in your name, for here we are challenged, encouraged and reminded of who you are and what you have done.

We have been blessed in the way you change us for the better.

We are thankful for the love, patience, kindness and gentleness of your Spirit.

Continue your transforming work whereby we who have been loved will love; we with whom you have been patient will show patience; we to whom kindness has been shown will be kind; and we with whom you have been gentle will be gentle ourselves with all people.

For all of this and more, we are so very grateful, as we pray together in the Lord's Prayer, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,**

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.