

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of October 4, 2009

The Light of the World Cannot Be Hidden (Philippians 2:12-16)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for today's homily is from the fourth chapter of James. Our Lord says to us:

"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold on to the Word of Life."

This is the Word of God.

Friends in Christ, this passage was the topic of yesterday's Bible studies at the LWML Rally. The theme of the rally was Shine Like Stars. Now when we look up at the stars at night they are truly magnificent. Here in the city we can't always see them as clearly because of the artificial light but out in the country they shine with brilliance. The stars are light years away and yet they twinkle and shine bright. It's truly amazing that each of those many stars is an intense beaming sun like the one in our galaxy. Some are smaller; some are bigger; but they all shine with incredible brilliant energy.

In this letter to the Philippians, St. Paul tells them that they shine like stars in the universe. That's quite a complement! But the Bible says that the world on the other hand is crooked and depraved and in darkness. The world is groping in the darkness while the light of the Gospel of Christ shines. Now what was so different about the Christians Paul was writing to? Were they the holiest people the world had ever seen? What made them stand out as lights?

But this was not just for the Christians from Philippi. Jesus said the same to His disciples. He said, "You are the light of the world". And it was not just for the twelve disciples either. All the churches of every generation are called the "light of the world". God can use even us today in 2009, imperfections and all to be His light to this world that is in spiritual darkness.

Friends, what makes us the light of the world is not that we are better than those of the world. We were born with a sinful nature like everyone else. Every day we struggle with this Old Adam to tame it and keep it down. We struggle to pray for those who offend us; we struggle not to let frustration get the better of us. We struggle not to get a swelled head when a complement might come our way. Like the world we find that life is full of struggles. As Christians it is often a struggle to not be consumed with worries about money or to have our hobbies and activities distract us from our walk with Christ.

And yet, Jesus says we are the “light of the world”. To understand this we must understand that the light we shine is reflected light. We are not the source of the light. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). He said, “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness” (John 12:46). The light begins and ends with Jesus.

He reflects His light through His people. Our pride though likes to think that good things come from us but the truth is that there is only One who is good – and that is God Himself. Indeed, if there is anything good in us it is Christ Himself.

The Bible uses the word “light” over and over again. When Jesus says “I am the light of the world” He is not only referring to His brilliant glory that He displays in heaven to the host of angels and saints and that He showed to His disciples at His transfiguration. Primarily, “Light” in the Biblical sense means “Truth”. Jesus is the Truth. His teaching is the truth and His church speaks the truth about Him.

If we look at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that His disciples with Him are the Light of the world. And yet there is only one light source. Jesus is like the sun, as Revelation 1:18 says, “His face is like the sun shining in its brilliance” and we are like the moon that reflects His light. It all comes from Him. If there is anything good in us it is Jesus. So when Paul says we shine like the stars it means that in God’s eyes by believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins He does not count our sins against us. And by His sheer grace, because He paid for those sins, in His sight we shine just as Jesus shines.

People say things like, “Let me shed some light on the situation.” Essentially that means “Let me show you the truth.” Jesus sheds light on the situation of this world. He shows that we are sinners but that He loves us and died to pay for those sins to make us His people who love Him in return and so we might reflect His truth and His love to those in our midst.

Jesus tells His disciples, “A city on a hill cannot be hidden...people do not light a lamp and put it under a bowl”... He says, “Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” In other words, the news about Jesus cannot be contained. He is the light of all lights to guide the world back home to the heavenly Father. Jesus’ Word is like a bright beaming lighthouse that guides lost ships home to safety.

Psalms 119 says, “Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Without the Word of Jesus we could never find the path to eternal life. Jesus lights the way, because He is the way.

And the way for us to be lights to this world is to spend time in His Light. It says in Exodus 34 that when “Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD”. Our face may not be visibly as bright as Moses but our spirit is

lifted by God's Word. The peace that Jesus brings us with God gives a sense of peace and contentment.

The Bible says in Romans 10, "Faith comes by hearing the message". And so the more we can hear the message of Jesus, the more the light of the Gospel will fill us up and radiate to those around us.

Friends, we shine most clearly when we hold on to this message, when we hold on to Jesus Himself and His atoning sacrifice. As Philippians 2:15-16 says, "You shine as lights in the world as you hold fast to the Word of Life".

Of course there is a place for good works. There is a definite role for social ministry by the church. By showing we care we show that God cares. When we reach out in whatever way to help someone in need then we reflect the One who reached out to us and gave everything to give us life with Him.

And the end goal of these acts of mercy and kindness are to point people to the One who can help them for eternal life, to give glory to Jesus. After all, no one cares what we know until they know that we care.

A good example of this is when Hurricane Mitch hit the Central American country of Nicaragua in the 1990s. Lutheran World Relief was one of the very first relief agencies who did much of work to help the people who had lost homes and their way of life. The people there came to respect the Lutheran Church a great deal as they saw the love of Jesus displayed. As a result, the Lutheran Church has been growing like gangbusters there over the last 10 years. And many Nicaraguan people have come to praise their Father in heaven because of the love of Jesus reflected through His people and the light of His Word preached in its purity.

Dear friends, we have a precious treasure, priceless in fact. We as a church hold in our grasp the Light of the World in the Word and Sacraments. We have the Word of eternal life in Christ, the One who has risen and overcome death and sin. He is the truth that shines in the darkness for anyone to see and receive with the eyes of faith.

May our Lord guide us and shine His Gospel through us. Like a city on a hill our Saviour cannot be hidden. He is a gift that's too great to keep secret. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.