

St James United Church

Message for February 5, 2023

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

"The Meaning of Light"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20



What is the meaning of life? This question has been on the mind of humans for as long as there have been humans. There are many answers, but one may be found in a question pertinent to our readings, especially the continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, namely, what is the meaning of light?

It's an important question as we hear Jesus shift from last week's world flipping blessings to call his disciples the light of the world. It's tempting to assume this is conditional, that I'm light only inasmuch as I share in Christ's light. After all, in John's gospel Jesus is the light of the world not the disciples, an idea reinforced in Christianity's historical emphasis on our need of redemption, be it the Orthodox belief that God becomes incarnate so the divine image can be restored in us, or a standard Protestant focus on the cross and the teaching that Jesus took our sins on himself so that in his death we could be forgiven by God. Yet as I read Mt. 5, I don't see conditionality in Jesus' words. He tells the people they're the light of the world, shining just as they are.

This is an important affirmation for us to claim, Jesus inviting us to love ourselves without any condition, not for anything the world lifts up as worthy of applause but to share our love and life just as we are. When we do, that's how we bring goodness to the world. This is Paul's point as he claims he preached the cross in weakness not strength, coming not to be heralded as eloquent or part of an elite group, but letting the cross speak for itself. In this he cuts through some of the ways that people in Corinth claimed status, making sure that the gospel empowered everyone. He took to heart what we see in our gospel as Jesus' words about salt and light come right after his list of "blessed are yous". It's the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the peace-making and the justice-seeking who are the light of the world, everyone who was consistently told by others that they were the exact opposite.

No wonder most Christians in Corinth were from lower classes with a few wealthy people mixed in, each affirmed that they shone, simply because they were created in God's image. Sadly this teaching of divine blessing was later replaced by a focus on Adam and Eve's disobedience and a theology of original sin. Over time that undermined Jesus' simple affirmation that all of us are light, replaced with various teachings on how some groups shine more brightly than others. Thus having both women and men as leaders gave way to male only ministry, clergy, especially if they were unmarried, were seen as more holy, wealth became a sign of divine blessing and with the discovery of new lands, theologies were developed to

justify displacing and enslaving “other” races. The church began to echo rather than to challenge the society of which it was a part, and the world we live in today is still a reflection of that change, even as the church slowly changes.

Because of hard-baked biases we need periods like Black History Month each February, and Asian Heritage Month, Women’s History Month and Indigenous Heritage Month, times when we intentionally shine a light on the contributions of peoples historically told that they don’t shine. Given that it’s February I should share an example that involves anti-Black racism but there is an ad that’s really been bugging me lately. It’s a truck ad. Two men and a woman are about to go on a hike. The men are wearing boots but the woman has on fuzzy slippers. It’s supposed to be funny but it is sexist as heck. The fact it was produced is a reminder that despite how far we have come as a society, boy do we have a long way to go.

And because of that I am thankful that the church is reclaiming the original inclusive teaching of Jesus, and creating safe and empowering spaces where everyone is encouraged to shine, to share their gifts of leadership, to grow in confidence so that they can go out and challenge the biases that are still at play in our community. In this we are not just light but are salt. In calling us salt of the earth, Jesus wasn’t referring to a seasoning, but rather to the salt slabs used in clay ovens that helped ignite the dried dung they used as fuel. As we encourage one another to shine, we also help to bring needed change in our communities. In this we live out what Matthew meant a few chapters earlier when he quoted Isaiah in regard to Jesus – “Arise, your light is come! The people who lived in a land of death’s shadow have seen a great light.” The situation Isaiah spoke of was one of oppression and suffering, the people ruled by a foreign empire and Jesus responded to a similar situation, he and his disciples a light by calling out injustice. We are to continue that mission, all of us together shining with love for all to see.

This reminds me of when I lived in a fly-in community. Each year a winter road would be made over the snow and ice for supplies to be trucked north. Many of us also drove south to pick up food and other needs, but because the road was twisty, it was hard to see the oncoming big rigs. Most people drove at night so they could see headlights approaching. I added my own practice of not passing another vehicle but forming a convoy instead. I liked how the extra headlights made it easier to see sharp turns and other hazards ahead. That to me is who we are as church, sharing light so that we can see the road ahead and together we can seek to overcome obstacles to a more loving and just world.

I know this exploration of what Jesus meant by calling us the light of the world may not reveal, as I suggested earlier, the meaning of life, but to me it does offer insight into the meaning of our life together as church, something into which we welcomed six people, them pledging to share their light with us as we pledge to share ours with them. So let us shine and let us encourage each other to shine as well. When we do, we bring goodness to the world. Amen.