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Matthew 5:13-20  
Being Light for the World

“You are the light of the world.” What a huge statement. What does this look like in practice? What are some examples of people being light for the world? Can you think of some? I want to take a couple of minutes here and share some ideas, but first let’s pray . . .

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus we pray, Amen.

So, what are some examples of people being light for the world?

- engage others in the world
- enabling diversity
- nurturing a healthy, ecofriendly world
- restoring or repairing relationship

Why does Jesus say this? At the time, Jesus needed a strong statement to preach to those around him who were just struggling. We’ve talked before about the poverty that was systemic in his world. But his was also a

culture where religion and politics had never been separated, so when Jesus’ ancestors were exiled and some eventually returned to an occupied country, they understandably had some questions for God. What is our relationship with God? What do you want us to do in this occupied country? Naturally, there was a variety of answers that were being lived out by Jesus’ contemporaries: some wanted to fight, some wanted to collaborate with those occupying the country, and still others wanted to put their heads down to deeply study and practice the Torah. If they couldn’t win political independence, at least they could preserve their cultural and religious identity as a people called and set apart by God.<sup>1</sup> So Jesus preaches into this landscape of responses to a reality in which the people had so few options.

Jesus of course rejects the violence, but he also challenges those who want to isolate themselves and maintain that God’s kingdom is still coming some time in the future.<sup>2</sup> He says to them, no actually right now God is doing a

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word Year A Vol 1, p. 335

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

new thing. Don't take your light and put it under a basket; bring it out and put it on the stand where it can give light to the whole house of Israel. These times are for engagement and inspiration, not hiding away to preserve a relationship with God that needs updating.

What does this first century problem have to say to our context today? We could discuss responses to any number of systems of oppression around the world today, corrupt leaders, and climate change deniers . . . but the tension Jesus is addressing is actually within Judaism. It's about how to respond to the times; Jesus challenges the traditional way of thinking and practicing and offers a new way of understanding God's relationship with God's people. Today the Christian church is going through a massive shift as it comes to terms with the fact that the worship practices of Christianity are resonating less and less with the culture around us . . . particularly with younger generations. And that's pretty important given what Archbishop William Temple said, which is: "The church is the only

organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members." And I'm really proud of this congregation, because you did something bold with the amalgamation: the founding congregations went through a process of deciding whether to maintain their respective denominational identity and practice, or lean into God's call of bringing the two together into something new. And then 2.5 years in, finding ourselves in the middle of a visioning process where we are specifically looking at our relationship with the world around us . . . and how we can authentically engage that world. It's exciting to be on this journey with you, wherever it takes us.

This is Jesus' invitation . . . to be engaged with the world around us. Don't hide your light . . . share it.

Do you remember when I brought the beatitudes as translated from Aramaic by Neil Douglas Klotz? I was delighted to find that Klotz also translated a verse from this morning's text in the same way. In the familiar NRSV verse 16 says "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good

works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Klotz translates it this way from the Aramaic: “Let the light of your being, the consciousness of knowing your real Self, radiate and illuminate the human beings you find before you, as well as the community of voices you find within.

When they see and feel your atmosphere of ripeness, your ability to act at the right time and place, they will be reconnected in praise to the song and harmony of the Parent of All, the nurturing Force that re-creates the cosmos each moment, unfolding a universe

of sound, vibration, and light.”<sup>3</sup>

Beautiful language, right? And very different from what we read before. I just want to highlight a couple of things. The NRSV says “that they may see your good works.” When we think of engaging our community through good works, things like helping a neighbour or feeding the poor might come to mind. The Aramaic word for “good” is translated ripe. “When they see and feel your atmosphere of ripeness, your ability to act at the right time and place . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Many years ago I was having a casual conversation with my conference minister at some church event. He said, Karen, you should be a minister. We need people from the sciences in ministry. I laughed it off and moved on . . . fast forward 4 years or so and I was roommates with a friend I had grown up with in church. One day she said in passing that she was planning to go to seminary . . . and the words just rang in my ears as I remembered

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<sup>3</sup> Blessings of the Cosmos. Klotz. P. 1-2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

what my conference minister had said and my whole world began to change. Both people were just speaking their truth . . . but their words were ripe for my ears and timely. In the Aramaic language, doing “good” takes us beyond serving others. It’s about being in those moments that are uniquely suited for our response . . . and a response that is a gift to another person . . . not just something nice, but perhaps something that wakes them up or helps them connect the dots or reveals to them who they are.

The other thing I want to highlight here is the Aramaic understanding of the word “light” . . . it’s translated “knowing.” Both of these words, good and light might remind you of the creation story when God brought forth light and saw the light was good. God brought knowing out of unknowing and saw that it was ripe . . . the time was right.

Our own learning happens in a similar way . . . it often seems to be right on time. As we learn and grow, our discoveries are often immediately useful and relevant to our lives, and in service of those around us.

Lately I’ve been getting to this place in a sermon and I think about how we actually practice something like being light for the world, or learn to discern God’s voice in our lives. Lately it seems like it all comes down to formation . . . learning together, supporting and encouraging each other to be out in the community with our lights up on the lampstand for all to see.

There has always been a rhythm in the church of gathering together for worship and study, blessing each other out into the world with new learning to serve others, and bringing those experiences back into gatherings for celebration and new learning. So as we think about our relationship with the world around us, we also need to think about how we might support each other . . . what form that might take. We are the light of the world . . . and we need each other in order to shine.