

# Let Your Beatitudinal Light Shine!

A sermon based on Matthew 5:13-20 and Isaiah 58:1-12

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My parents owned a health resort near an unusual lake in Saskatchewan during my teenage years. Every fall, just before freeze-up, the waters of Manitou Lake would deposit a mineral salt on its shoreline, and I would spend hours shovelling this heavy salt into large bags and transporting the bags to our Salt Shed, a rather large shed, or a small warehouse, if you will. In summer we would sell this salt to customers who wanted to enjoy its healing properties in the comfort of their own homes, and my job then was to fill and carry 100-pound bags of this stuff to their cars, which were never parked close at hand. This I did every summer, from when I was twelve years old, until I was eighteen.

Whenever I read the section in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus talks about salt and light, I am drawn more to the latter metaphor than to the former, for I associate the former with hard work! When Jesus talks about salt being "trampled under foot," it describes an urge I often had as a teenager. When Jesus describes his followers as "the salt of the earth," it conjures up an image of Christians stockpiled in some dark, dank shed. I wouldn't want my own experience to ruin a good biblical metaphor, but, with your indulgence, I'd like to focus on the metaphor of light this morning.

## Darkness, and the Need for Light

Light has several obvious beneficial uses, both materially and spiritually. The most obvious use, of course, is that light helps us to see, but essentially, our appreciation of light is in relation to the negative effects of darkness. In fact, it's not just that light is beneficial, it is often necessary, given these negative effects. For example, people who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder suffer it around this time of year, when natural light is minimal, and they benefit from using other light sources to compensate for the lack of sunlight. Similarly, a young family discovered the benefits of light when their four year old son was having so many nightmares that he feared going to bed at night. They gave him a toy flashlight at bedtime, so that he could scare the monsters away by shining the light on them, and that set his mind at ease.

Light and darkness have a prominent place in the biblical scheme of things. "Darkness was upon the face of the deep," begins the first page of the Bible. "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light.'" (Genesis 1:2-3, KJV) Gone was the darkness. Isaiah talks of the "people who walked in darkness," "who lived in a land of deep darkness...." (Isaiah 9:2) The psalmist writes of walking "through the valley of the shadow of death". (Psalm 23:4)

The metaphor of darkness may seem a bit harsh in these tender times, but, as Frederick Buechner says, "If darkness is meant to suggest a world where nobody can see very well -- either themselves, or each other, or where they are heading; ...if darkness is meant to convey a sense of uncertainty, of being lost, of being afraid; if darkness suggests conflict, conflict between races, between nations, between

individuals; ...then we live in a world that knows much about darkness." (Listening to Your Life, page 266)

We know much about darkness, on various levels. On an individual level some of us know what it is to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, having been taken to that valley in our walk through illness and bereavement. Some of us know what St. John of the Cross called the "dark night of the soul," those barren patches in our spiritual pilgrimage when our prayers seem futile, God appears to be nowhere, and fellowshiping with other Christians becomes wearisome and burdensome, if not downright irksome.

On a societal level there are other forms of darkness that could benefit from a spot of light. The darkness of child pornography, for example, could benefit from the light of, if not jurisprudence, at least some kind of prudence. Euphemisms like "inter-generational sex," used in the recent Supreme Court case in British Columbia, while intended to make pedophilia appear less malevolent, do little to brighten up a pitiful and shameful situation. And while our courts are increasingly insecure about making judgments about the morality or immorality of sexual choices -- another euphemism -- it strikes me that there is little light left shining in our system of law when rights become unhinged from any moral vision or sense of responsibility or respect. ("Child Pornography and Excessive Individualism," Lex View # 26)

On both a societal and global level, there is the darkness of injustice. The Brazilian priest, Dom Helder Camara, had this darkness in mind when he talked of the role of a Christian in a land dark with injustice. He wrote:

"God permits that the symbol of my life be a candle,  
that spends itself, that consumes itself  
while there is still wax to burn;  
when nothing more remains to be consumed,  
that my flame, yet an instant,  
dare to remain alive and afoot to rumble after,  
happy in the conviction that one day  
the forces of Right will conquer  
the pretended right of force."

Injustice, tyranny, evil, tragic suffering, terror and tragedy are all forms of darkness desperately in need of light. The prophet Isaiah plays with the same image, saying that if we "...loose the bonds of injustice, ...undo the thongs of the yoke, ...let the oppressed go free, ...share (our) bread with the hungry, ...bring the homeless poor into (our) house(s)," then shall "(our) light...break forth like the dawn..." (Isaiah 58:6-8) If "...you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." (Isaiah 58:10)

## **Which Light?**

We could probably all agree that light is preferable to darkness, but it begs the question, "Which light?" Which light is the light of choice to banish darkness? No doubt the judge in the recent B.C. Supreme Court decision thought that casting the light of "rights and freedoms" on the case before him would be the most helpful light. Public

media often claim the right to cast the light of "freedom of expression" on issues, even if the shadows cast by this light are severely destructive.

It was fashionable in the last century, as it still is in our own, to accuse the Church of belonging to the Dark Ages. To which G.K. Chesterton replied, "...I have found that Christianity, ...far from belonging to the Dark Ages, was the one path across the Dark Ages that was not dark....how can we say that the Church wishes to bring us back into the Dark Ages? The Church was the only thing that ever brought us out of them." (The Quotable Chesterton, page 82)

Nonetheless, a century earlier it had become fashionable to shine the "light of reason" on everything. Reason was no longer regarded as a divine gift enabling us to perceive and act upon God's laws. And liberal theology readily transferred the light imagery of the Bible to the sphere of reason and knowledge. Everything could be solved by reason. No societal problem existed that couldn't be solved with sufficient education. Chesterton said, "There is nothing very much the matter with the age of reason; except, alas, that it comes before the age of discretion." (The Quotable Chesterton, page 291)

In our own recent past we were enlightened by the often indiscrete "light of moral relativism," one of the philosophical grandchildren of the age of reason. And we have bought into this notion, hook, line and sinker, especially in relation to sexual mores. Thus, no one is promiscuous anymore; they are simply "sexually active". No one is "living in sin" anymore; they are simply living without benefit of a marriage ceremony, or, in words I've heard once too often, trying out a relationship, as one would any other inexpensive commodity.

## **The Light of God**

Whenever I read Jesus' words about salt and light in the Sermon on the Mount, I am initially excited. They seem such colourful and robust metaphors, until I realize that alone they can mean everything and nothing. It seems eminently sensible -- I prefer that phrase even since "commonsense" has borne the brunt of so much rough and recent handling -- to receive the illumination of light and the seasoning of salt, only these metaphors convey little without more specific content.

The content of light, as Jesus used the metaphor, was not the light of reason. Light, in the ages before the Age of Reason -- ages that were not all that unreasonable -- was not just any light, but the light of God Himself! "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) Light suggested moral goodness or holiness. (John 3:19-20; Ephesians 5:8) Light was a symbol of salvation (Psalm 27:1), a salvation effected not through human wisdom but through the redemptive activity of Christ. (John 1:1-9) Light symbolized truth and understanding (Psalm 119:105, 130), as well as joy and God's favour (Isaiah 58:8). So the light whereof Jesus speaks on the Sermon on the Mount is not just any little penlight of reason or human ingenuity, it is the illumination of the Divine!

It's also important to look at the context of Jesus' use of the metaphors of salt and light. First of all, they are used in the Sermon on the Mount, which is more than a compilation of what someone (Harrell Beck) has called some "helpful hints for harmful habits". The Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than the inaugural address of the Messiah! The

"Magna Carta of the Kingdom," if you will. The Messiah's Speech from the Throne, outlining the plan of action for Jesus' ministry as well as for those who follow him.

## **Beatitudinal Light**

The immediate context of Jesus' use of these metaphors is that they follow right on the heels of the beatitudes, a list of nine blessings not normally associated with the "good life". Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matthew 5:3-10) And then the one that makes absolutely clear that Jesus' purpose is counter-cultural, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." (Matthew 5:11)

And so, when Jesus calls his followers the "light of the world," I think that he is asking us to shine a beatitudinal light on things, to shine, for example, the light of our spiritual poverty on situations where arrogance and presumption often rule, for those who realize their own impoverishment of spirit also know their complete dependence on God.

When Jesus calls us the "light of the world," he is asking us to shine the light of mournfulness on situations sparkling with superficial joy. Mournfulness may not sound very light-hearted, but those with the interior capacity to mourn the losses and tragedies of this world also have the emotional capacity to know deep joy. Following Jesus is about caring, about the capacity to care intensely for the sufferings, sorrows, and needs of others.

When Jesus calls us the "light of the world," he is asking us to shine the light of meekness on situations bristling with pride and boastfulness and the light of gentleness and self-control on situations ripe with uncontrolled lust and passion.

When Jesus calls us the "light of the world," he is asking us to shine the light of hunger and thirst for righteousness on situations in which many are satisfied with but glib and comfortable answers to deep injustices.

When Jesus calls us the "light of the world," he is asking us to shine, not just any light, but the light of mercy on a culture hell-bent on revenge.

Likewise Jesus calls us to shine, not just any borrowed lights, but the lights of purity of heart and peacemaking. Jesus calls us to shine the light of a heart transformed by the Spirit of God, the same Spirit of God who sent Jesus to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to...captives, and release to...prisoners...." (Isaiah 61:1; compare Luke 4:18)

The beatitudes are about our attitudes, our internalization of the law, though we should be careful not to domesticate them by making them into bland suggestions for emotional well-being. There is more at work here than a concern to learn to cope with whatever is the status quo. Jesus was executed, not for being sugar, not for being a feeble shadow, but because his message and example were sufficiently salty to convey the real flavour of God in a marketplace of otherwise bland spiritualities. He was executed not because he brightened the corner where he was, but because his light

was sufficiently bright to expose hypocrisy and evil. The light of the beatitudes invites us to walk the costly way of the Cross!

## **Beatitudinal Light Transforms**

A science teacher pointed out that when a candle burns, its carbon and hydrogen compounds rise up the wick, there to vaporize, to burn, to become water vapour and carbon dioxide. When an incandescent light bulb burns, the tungsten filament slowly deteriorates. When the sun shines, the hydrogen becomes helium, losing some of its mass. (Robert J. Baker, "Light Is Costly," I'm Listening, Lord, Keep Talking) The presence of light means that something has changed, been given up, used, surrendered, reduced to a simpler and humbler form of matter, which is to say that light has a transformational quality.

Someone was once asked, "Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?" Meaning, are you like a thermometer, which reflects its environment, or like a thermostat, which influences and changes its environment. Light influences and changes its environment. Someone has written a book entitled, "The Best of The Journal of Irreproducible Results". In this book are parodies of scientific papers, and one of the articles in it is about a new invention called a "dark bulb," which you put into a socket, just like a light bulb, only when you turn it on, the room gets dark! The idea, if scientifically possible, might have intriguing applications, but that's not the way darkness and light work. Light is something that is or is not present, whereas darkness is the absence of light. You can use light to remove darkness, but you can't use darkness to remove light. Light is transformational, influencing and changing its environment.

We have often been encouraged to work for change with the proverb, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". It's a proverb that offers good counsel, but it's also one that appeals to our individualistic view of life and faith. Our culture, for example, holds up Thomas Edison, the inventor of the incandescent lightbulb, as a brilliant inventor, and indeed he was; he had patents for over a thousand inventions! His first major invention, the stock ticker, made him a fortune when he was but 21 years of age. He also invented the phonograph, and established the Edison Electric Company -- later to become the mammoth General Electric Company -- by the time he was 35! It's important to remember, however, that work on the incandescent bulb had been going on for almost 40 years before Edison made his discoveries, and that the dynamo that generated the electricity for his first 59 customers was developed elsewhere. His contribution fit into a string of other developments that allowed his contribution to become a significant one.

It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, but keep in mind that a six-pack of candles gives off six times as much light as one candle. There is a story of a church built on a high mountain in Switzerland, a beautiful church that had been built with great care by the villagers who lived nearby, but which had no light! Every Sunday evening, however, the people who lived on the mountainside opposite the church saw something magic happen. When the church bell rang, those who worshipped in the church would begin to wend their way up the mountainside towards the church. Each person brought a lantern, and when they arrived at church they would hang their lanterns around the church on pegs set in the walls. If only a few people came to church the light would be very dim, but conversely, when lots of people came to church the accumulative light of

the members made the church shine brightly! After the service the villagers would take their lanterns home, and to those who watched from a distance it was as if a stream of light poured out of the church and over the mountainside. ("The Light In The Chapel," Whole People of God, 1993)

### **Beatitudinal Light Requires Dispersal**

It's a nice story, but as Reginald Bibby, my former tutorial instructor, has pointed out, the accumulated light of Christians in Canada may not be so inspiring. In his examination of Canadian churches, Bibby discovered that on almost all major social and political issues Christians do not differ in their opinions from non-Christians. The candles held by Christians shine no brighter than the candles of their secular sisters and brothers, or, to twist the image even more, one might say that Christians curse the darkness no less than their secular counterparts. Also, the very things that make the Church unique appear to hold very little interest for Christians in this country. We would rather talk about psychology than about faith. We would rather talk about the need for political reform than about the need for conversion -- spiritual transformation!

Those of you who endured the Ice Storm a year ago know how difficult modern life can be without power. A similar event happened in 1978 when the heaviest snow storm in Boston's history struck the city. It lasted a week, and during part of that time there was no power. Boston, like Ottawa twenty years later, had its share of stories to tell about both the neighbourly and dastardly aspects of human nature revealed during the storm. Some of the stories were quite tragic, but an intriguing aspect of this event was that the Boston Edison Power Company had sufficient power in its generating system during the storm to meet all of the needs of the city. The problem was in one simple transformer in the main plant and with the transmission lines from a substation.

Jesus said that we are the light of the world. We are lights reflecting the very light of God, light that has the power to transform individuals and society, but even the light of God requires dispersal to be effective. We need to be connected to the Source. The light of God requires the transmission lines of our attitudes, our actions, our spirits, our prayers, our faith, if it is to do its transforming work.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.