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Epiphany 5A[1]
Peace, Seattle
February 9, 2014
Matthew 5:13-20

BEING LIGHT

We're used to talking about Jesus as the light of the world.
We're accustomed to speaking of God as the source of our enlightenment.

But how surprising it is to hear Jesus today, pointing not to God or to himself, but to those gathered around him on the hillside, and saying: "YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD."

Jesus, it seems, has more confidence in us than we have in ourselves!

Jesus the light of the world? No problem, but, you and me?
Maybe Matthew didn't hear it right… maybe it was written down wrong.

YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. A CITY BUILT ON A HILL CANNOT BE HID.
NO ONE LIGHTS A LAMP AND THEN PUTS IT UNDER A BASKET, THEY PUT IT ON THE LAMPSTAND, AND IT GIVES LIGHT TO THE WHOLE HOUSE.

You know, Jesus does sound pretty clear here. Maybe Matthew got it right after all.
But still, we hesitate…not sure about going public, not sure we have what it takes to put ourselves out there. We'd prefer that someone who's better trained or more qualified take the lead.

I'm not a fan of everything Max Lucado writes, but in a story he tells about candles in a closet, he gets it right.[2]

As the story begins an electrical storm has caused a blackout in his family's neighborhood and Max feels his way to the storage closet where the candles are kept.

Lighting a match, he finds the shelf of candles their stands and lights four of them.
One for the kitchen table so they can eat, one for his desk so he can read, one for his wife Denalyn to stitch by, and the largest one to lighten up the living room.

But as he turns to leave the closet with the large candle in hand he hears a voice telling him to STOP RIGHT WHERE HE IS, and he finds himself in conversation with the candle.

> **"Who are you? What are you?"**
>
> I'M A CANDLE. I looked at the candle I was holding, burning a strong, golden flame…
>
> DON'T TAKE ME OUT OF HERE!
>
> **"What?"**
>
> I SAID, DON'T TAKE ME OUT OF THIS ROOM.
>
> **"What do you mean? I have to take you out. You're a candle. Your job is to give light.**
> **It's dark out there. People are stubbing their toes and walking into walls.**
> **You have to come out and light up the place!"**
> BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE ME OUT. I'M NOT READY, the candle explained. I NEED MORE PREPARATION.

[1] Service cancelled due to snow. Same texts used following Sunday, in lieu of Epiphany 6A texts.
[2] Max Lucado, *God Came Near – Chronicles Of The Christ.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986, 2004).

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I couldn't believe my ears. "More preparation?"

YEAH, I'VE DECIDED I NEED TO RESEARCH THIS JOB OF LIGHT-GIVING SO I WON'T GO OUT AND MAKE A BUNCH OF MISTAKES. YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW DISTORTED THE GLOW OF AN UNTRAINED CANDLE CAN BE. SO I'M DOING SOME STUDYING.

I JUST FINISHED A BOOK ON WIND RESISTANCE. I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF A GREAT SERIES OF TAPES ON WICK BUILD-UP AND CONSERVATION – I'M READING THE NEW BEST SELLER ON FLAME DISPLAY. HAVE YOU HEARD OF IT?"
"No," I answered.

YOU MIGHT LIKE IT. IT'S CALLED WAXING ELOQUENTLY.

Max, having given up on that particular candle, chooses a different one, but the same problem follows. Each candle offers a different excuse for why it can't go public with its light.
None is ready to leave the relative safety of their place on the shelf.

Max pleads with them, but to no avail. Finally, and the story ends this way:

I put the big candle on the shelf and took a step back and considered the absurdity of it all.
Four perfectly healthy candles [willing to talk about light] but refusing to come out [and let it shine.]

I had all I could take. One by one I blew them out…I stuck my hands in my pockets and walked back out into the darkness.

"[Max," asked my wife,] "Where are the candles?"

"They don't…they won't work. Where did you buy those candles anyway?"

**"Oh, they're church candles. Remember the church [downtown] that's closing?
I bought them there."**

"[At last,]" he writes, "I understood."

Of course the story of is more complicated than that, as all of us who have struggled to keep a congregation alive well know. There are all kinds of factors that contribute to the rise or fall of a congregation's life cycle. Yet still, this morning, Jesus says so clearly.

YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.
Not, YOU HAVE POTENTIAL TO BE LIGHT, but YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

We are called as a congregation to visibility!

Sometimes the walls of the building can become barriers to that visibility.
Sometimes it feels safer inside, with people I know—or am getting to know—and it feels risky to go out purposefully, as community, and say WE STAND FOR LIGHT – WE WILL BE LIGHT.

"Our deepest fear," someone once said, "is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us."

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In order for light to be seen, the light must be willing to come out of the closet; to go where the darkness exists, to engage it, to walk through it, to challenge it, so that, in time, the light can overcome it.[3]

The long history of the church is riddled with examples of abysmal failures when it comes to this. Whenever through the centuries the church has been in a position of power, it has boldly claimed WE ARE THE LIGHT, and then used its status to pursue works of darkness.

Ironically, history teaches us that those who confess Christ can be the most closed off to workings of God!

But when we do get it right, there's a powerful witness to the LIGHT that cannot be denied.

One of the places we'll be traveling to during sabbatical is a small village in south-central France called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

During the Second World War collaborators in Nazi occupied France delivered 83,000 Jewish people to the Nazi death camps - only 3,000 ever returned.[4]

But in the area of Le Chambon, ordinary people, often poverty-stricken themselves, quietly took in, protected 5,000 Jewish men, women and children—as many as their entire population, and often at the peril of their own lives.

In June 1940, the very day after France capitulated to Germany, Pastor André Trocmé stood in the pulpit of his parish church to address his parishioners:

> "The responsibility of Christians," he told them, "is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences, through the weapons of the spirit."

Trocmé served as a moral compass for the village. Defying the Nazi régime and French collaborationists, the villagers of Le Chambon provided a safe haven throughout the war for the Jews.

Every home hid strangers, not for days, but for years. So deep was their call to being servants of light that no resident of Le Chambon ever turned away, denounced, or betrayed a single Jewish refugee.

What does LETTING LIGHT SHINE mean for us as the 21st century unfolds?
It's a question and a challenge we're called to keep ever before us. We say it this way in our vision statement: "We are called to discern God's presence and invitation into unfamiliar places, and to venture beyond ourselves, so all people will experience God's love."

We are called to visibility. To venture beyond ourselves; to venture out of the closet.
To bring light; to be light. To LET IT SHINE.

PRAYER:
Jesus, when you call us light, you claim more for us than we dare claim for ourselves. Move us, by your Spirit, beyond embarrassment, beyond fear, beyond hesitancy, so we will let it shine. Amen.

[3] Charles James Cook, *Feasting on the Word.* p 336
[4] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum USHMM COLLECTION (1990.238.1)