

This little light of mine
Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 5:13-16
July 14 2013

When wondering where to begin with any verbal or written presentation, it's always good to ask – what was the question again?

When in your experience has the church been salt and light?

Two weeks ago, Lori's sermon dug deeply into the image of being the salt of the earth – unique and important, completely necessary for life , she talked about being that kind of salt.

This week, I will focus on the second half of those verses – what it means to be the light of the world.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

I'm not sure about you, but the first thing that pops into my head when I read this verse is the song,

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine,
This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine,
let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.
Hide it under a bushel – "No." I'm going to let it shine.
Hide it under a bushel – "No." I'm going to let it shine.
Hide it under a bushel – "No." I'm going to let it shine.

We didn't sing this song this morning, but I'm sure that most of you
know some version of it. Maybe you know this one.

Chorus:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
Every day, every day, every day, every way,
Gonna let my little light shine.
Light that shines is the light of love,
Hides the darkness from above,
Shines on me and it shines on you,
Shows you what the power of love can do.
Shine my light both bright and clear,
Shine my light both far and near,
In every dark corner that I find,
Let my little light shine.

(Chorus)

Sunday gave me the gift of love,
Monday peace came from above,
Tuesday told me to have more faith,
Wednesday gave me a little more grace,
Thursday told me to watch and pray,
Friday told me just what to say and
Saturday gave me the power divine
Just to let my little light shine.

(Chorus twice)

Shine, shine, shine, shine, shine.

Or number 401 in the Hymnal – This little light of mine.

Before I go any further with this sermon you may be saying, okay, okay we get the point already.

But have we? As simple and straightforward as it seems, I'm not sure that we always understand what it means to be the light of the world.

Being the light of the world, the whole world, really – legitimately sounds a little daunting if not downright impossible on the one hand but on the other hand impossibilities seem to be God's specialty.

As well sermons often contrast light with darkness. This easy duality of light equals good, darkness equals bad is too simple to be helpful and frankly not even necessarily accurate. This duality leads us to forget that the life-nurturing womb is dark. Fertile soil is a place of darkness. We need darkness to sleep and be refreshed. We need cool dark shade to protect ourselves from the burning heat of the sun or there are serious consequences.

And so in today's sermon, I'm only going to talk about light –different kinds of light and how the church in my experience has occasionally been one kind of light or another.

First, picture if you will the light of the church functioning a bit like a searchlight.

At one time in the history of the church, bishops and other church leaders labeled sins among us and took quite seriously their responsibility to root them out deliberately and publically. These “sins” would have included premarital expressions of sexuality that in some cases led to pregnancy. I recall a time when a young couple had to stand up in front of the church and confess this sin. In this case I imagine the “light” that was the church to be more like a searchlight in the hands of purity police. We realize now that there were a few problems with this approach, namely that the searchlight in the hands of the purity police didn’t fall on everything that it should have and in the case I mentioned this couple’s relationship didn’t last and each of them moved a long way from the reach of that kind of light.

Another memory includes sitting in a hot humid tent on a July summer night when I was about 12 or 13 years old. The church’s searchlight in the hands of a hellfire and brimstone preacher led me to believe that there was no escape from God’s wrathful gaze. At the time I was confused. Only later did that confusion turn to anger and even later I learned that though it may be a fearful thing for God to gaze on your inward being the searchlight that is truly of God burns first with compassion, not hate and anger – granted anger against sinful parts of

my life surely, but not hate and anger against me. I don't recall that these preachers were adequately able to create this nuance.

Through both of these experiences, we kept singing, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

At the same time as these two examples of the church as searchlight was occurring, there were also times when the proverbial bushel basket might have been getting in the way of the light without our realizing it. Before I talk about how it was getting in the way let me begin with the positive. One of the most powerful lessons I learned from my parents is that actions speak louder than words. My father and mother have spent 78 years each, almost 58 of them married to each other, putting their faith into practice. They grew up and married someone from within their Mennonite faith community, continued the tradition of attending church together, raising their family in a Christian home, generally practicing what was preached in their church, (and for many of those years my dad was the preacher) and continue to this day practicing hospitality as a fine art, serving their community by volunteering at church, in the local thrift store and 10 Thousand villages in New Hamburg, and helping out their neighbours whenever they see a need. The kind of life they continue to model is the kind of life that they have

longed to see unfold for each of their six children and their families. It's also the kind of life that gives Mennonites in general a good reputation. How could the proverbial bushel have ever gotten in the way of the light of such a life of faith and service? My parents are of the generation where Mennonites were known as the quiet in the land. They lived in and still to a great extent live within a tight knit community that provides nurture for those who belong, but not only that, they do a lot of good for others locally and globally. The light is definitely shining. But what else could be observed about this picture? Personally, I couldn't see it as long as I lived there and I'm probably still blind to it much of the time.

How porous is the Mennonite community? How easy is it to belong? It's a question we've been asking ourselves here at TUMC. Here we are working steadily towards becoming a more welcoming and inclusive community, but we've had to be deliberate. And it is work. We've had to become aware of ways we subtly and sometimes not so subtly make distinctions between who's in and who's out? When a relief sale put on by Mennonites to raise money for the poor inadvertently makes it impossible for someone who is poor to contribute to the fundraising

effort because they can't afford to donate time, money and energy to the cause, the bushel has slipped over the light.

From searchlights to hidden lights, how is it possible that these things may even have occurred at the same time? It appears it's not so easy to be the city on the hill – the kind that can't be hidden and provides refuge for all who seek it. What's that last verse in Matthew, “Let your light so shine that others might see it and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This last part – giving glory to the Father in heaven – as the reason for shining the light is probably important here.

Isaiah 42:5-7 might be able to shine some light on our dilemma.

This is what God the Lord says— the Creator of the heavens,
who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth
with all that springs from it,
 who gives breath
to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:

6

“I, the Lord, have called
you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
 to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

7

to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison

and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

According to these verses – God will make Israel a covenant for the people

and a light to the nations – the kind of light that will open eyes that are blind, free captives from prison

and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Jesus took these same words to describe his own mission and ministry,

Yahweh, the same God who Creates the universe, gives breath to its people and life to all things – this God, the one who makes

impossibilities possible – makes the people into a light that opens the eyes of the blind (I guess this rules out being the kind of light that blinds people.)

God, here, is the agent, the actor, the one who makes the people into the light. They don't do it themselves. To be a light is to let the Glory of the Creator shine through you.

I'm reminded of two of my favourite quotes.

The first by Nelson Mandela:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that

most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. (Ah, it's not our light, it's the glory of God within us that is the light) It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

The second quote by Leonard Cohen takes a slightly different angle.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Unlike Mandela, he doesn't talk about how brilliant or talented we all are, rather the opposite – we're all just a little bit cracked and this might inadvertently be a good thing. It's how the light gets in. Theologically we could say we're broken and we're all in need of healing or salvation and that's how the light gets in. I imagine that both Cohen and Mandela attribute that light to the same source – God's glory that shines within us. In that same song Cohen also sings.

Every heart, every heart to love will come but like a refugee (again often and likely broken, in need of ongoing healing).

I would also add like a refugee that desperately needs that city on the hill – the one that shines so that others can see it.

In the end, what do these reflections mean for TUMC and for the mission that we are continually called to live out here at 1774 Queen Street East and especially in light of our upcoming building project?

Our light is not ours but rather God's that will shine through our cracks. Do we have any cracks in these walls? If not maybe we should plan some for the new part of the building. When we think it's our responsibility to manufacture the light we're more likely to blind people than allow God's light to open the eyes of the blind – including our own. Will we sometimes stay blind? If you read the rest of Isaiah 42, that's certainly a possibility. The Glory of God, that creates the universe, can't always hold still, as in here in Isaiah, starting at verse 14, God cries out like a woman in labour, lays waste to mountains and hills, dries up rivers and pools and then leads the blind by roads they do not know. God does this.

We won't always see the ways the bushel covers up the light. But maybe when we admit that we don't or can't always see, God won't hold still and God's light will get through because that's how it's always been. And we'll keep singing songs like, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

And really, this little light of mine is not in fact little at all if the source is beyond each of us to the very Glory of the Creating God's self that gives life and breath and covenant and light to the nations through Israel and God's servant.

And so what will we need to be and do moving forward? We will need to be aware of what God is already doing, aware of and not ashamed of our brokenness, and we'll need porous walls – so that the light can spill into the community within which we find ourselves. I look forward to the ways that becomes a reality, the ways that we will be porous to the community.

Beyond lots of windows and doors and cracks in the walls, I mean things like partnerships (that's something we already have experience with). I also mean that this building project creates a new opportunity to have meaningful conversations with our immediate neighbours. No door-to-door searchlights allowed though. Let's just light candles at the table

and invite people to join us, not trying to hide our own brokenness, but inviting others to share the table with us where we gather around the broken body of Jesus, the one whose mission it was to open the eyes of the blind. Or what about gathering around the light at our neighbours' tables? How would that change things? Will that help us see? And finally what will God do, the One whose light won't be contained by bushels or blindness? God's light will shine.