

“You Are the Light of the World”
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Readings: Matthew 5:14-16
“The Buddha’s Last Instruction” by Mary Oliver

I would like to begin just by saying a few words of appreciation. This will be my last sermon with you before I leave for my sabbatical. I took the first half of it last year, and now I will take the second half between January and mid-April. I am deeply grateful to this congregation - and especially the staff who will share my work - for allowing me to disrupt two church years, and have this time of respite and renewal. I will miss you. And I know you are in expert hands.

“Make of yourself a light,” said the Buddha upon his death. Like Jesus, he knew that he was light, and people were drawn to him. That was beside the point. He knew it was easier to idolize someone than to actually listen to what he said and live accordingly. I imagine both of them saying different versions of “Don’t you get it? It’s not about me! You - You are the light of the world.”

We are more likely to be familiar with other passages, which have Jesus saying, *I* am the light of the world. I don’t blame the gospel writers for saying this – as Marcus Borg puts it, to the writer of John, Jesus was the light of *his* world. (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*) This is the traditional meaning of Christmas – Jesus as the light of the world. But given everything else Jesus said, it seems far likelier that he would shift the focus away from himself.

“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 lampstand, and it gives light to all 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.” (Matthew 5:14-16) Some people interpret these words to mean fulfilling your duty as a religious person – to be a shining example to other people. These people are never very much fun. Have you noticed that? Not the kind you would like to be around. And light is supposed to attract, not repel people.

Others take this as encouragement to see ourselves as somehow special as religious people – we are special because we believe something or other, and must go out and convert the world to our belief. I can’t say that’s how I see it, either. But the great thing about any text that has lasted, from any religious tradition, is that it has multiple meanings in different times to different people. Any religious text that has stayed with us for centuries has done so because people keep finding new meaning in it – they keep reading it in the light of their own time, their own life.

I read it today as a Unitarian Universalist. It’s easy to get a sense of a great teacher’s specialness. It was harder to get a fix on their audience, the people their words were meant for. I would say that as a UU, that is my bigger concern. To be of value, a teaching has to apply to everyone, no matter who they are, no matter what they believe, no matter whether they are especially great moral achievers or struggling to figure out the right thing to do, like the rest of us.

The great African American theologian Howard Thurman said that Jesus’ message was intended for “people with their backs to the wall”. Thurman wrote in the 1940s, when black Americans were

becoming fed up with the message of the church. It was popular to aim Jesus' message at middle class and wealthy white people to "give to the poor" – themselves. "What were WE supposed to do?" they asked. "Sit around and be grateful? Find people who have even less and give away what we can't survive on, in the first place?" It didn't make sense, and it was insulting. Thurman said that Jesus was speaking to an audience that was incredibly poor, people with their backs to the wall. Jews were brutally occupied by the Romans, and were charged enormous taxes which would cost them their land when they couldn't pay. Jesus gave them hope, gave them a sense that the divine spark – the kingdom of God - was within themselves. The oppressor need not have any power over them. "You are the light of the world," he said. Not Caesar, not Rome. You. (Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*)

The Sermon on the Mount, from which this passage comes, contains the best known of Jesus' teachings. And, you know, I hate to be *critical*, but the Sermon is a bit too rambling and disjointed to make a very good sermon. Scholars tend to agree that all these ideas probably weren't said at one time. Many people consider it a concentrated packaging of his ideas, an album of his greatest hits. Blessed are the poor, the merciful, the peacemakers, love your enemies, turn the other cheek, you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world – giving out all these good ideas at one time is something no good preacher would do. My preaching professor at Meadville/Lombard warned us about this. Don't try to tell them everything you know in the first sermon, he said – You will succeed.

Since the gospels were written between 50 and 90 years after Jesus' death, they had to give the sayings that had lasted in people's memory. As Dominic Crossan says, it would be like trying to reconstruct the speeches of John F. Kennedy without any books or televised recordings, almost 50 years later. (John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Life*) And so you might remember "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country". Some of us were adults when he spoke those words, and heard them live; others of us heard them from our parents and teachers. But of all of the words he said, those words lasted. To understand them fully, we would also have to know something about Kennedy, and the founding of the Peace Corps, and what he tried to inspire in young people. We were coming out of the complacent, consumerist, conformist 1950s, and he wanted us to think of the world in a new way.

Similarly, the sayings and imagery of Jesus. Actual light, oil for lamps, was precious in those days, a rare commodity. Which makes the story of the light in the temple that burned for 8 days at Hanukkah all the more powerful. It was expensive. A museum in Amsterdam recently held an exhibit called "House of Light," and said that it wasn't until about 1800 that ordinary people could afford candles in their homes. You would hoard oil for your lamp carefully. It was precious. Poor people must have looked at the lighted homes of the rich with longing and envy.

The dark was darker for them, and more fearsome. No streetlights, nothing that would produce the scattered light that obscures the stars in towns like ours. Christmas carols are full of the image of night. O Holy Night, It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie, above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Silent Night, Holy Night. Christmas Eve was always more appealing to me as a child than Christmas Day – more magical, more evocative. But in those times, there was nothing romantic about the night. And a light appearing at night would have been a powerful spiritual symbol. Psychologically, it's about something that wakens us – out of or sleep, our usual inattentive state. Despair, even, depression. If you've ever had a dark night of the soul, you know what I mean. This is what Jesus' people were in.

They also lived in fear. Jesus looks at the people, as the Buddha looked, at what Mary Oliver called “that frightened crowd.” “Fear not” was also an important and often repeated message of Jesus. And he probably did see fear in them. Why else would you say it? Jesus looks at that frightened crowd, and says, even if you have no money, no power, no status, you are light. There is a power within you that is God, that is light. You don't need to be afraid.

“The light of the world” was a common expression in Jewish tradition at that time. Rabbis taught that God was the light of the world, or Torah was the light of the world, or the tribe of Israel. So saying “*You* are the light of the world” to ordinary people, most of whom were poor and struggling, was something radically different. Different ways to understand this are, You are like God. Or, you have God in you. Or, your heart is as important as the Torah. It would have enraged the priests as blasphemy. It would also have shaken people up and coaxed them to think of themselves in a new way.

But you do have an obligation to the light. The second part of this passage is definitely harder. Jesus in this passage expects us to shine, to use the precious oil, burn it up. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house.” This involves a certain amount of risk.

In Minnesota where I come from, my people do not encourage flagrant light-shining. We had words for people who {shudder} drew attention to themselves – *show-offs*, *grand-standers*, people who made spontaneous speeches at parties or burst into song because they couldn't help themselves. Cold looks and a particular sound we made {tsk, sigh}. A very simple sound, barely audible, but it was all it took to douse the light.

It can be scary to let people really see who you are. People who are gay or lesbian certainly know this. I was hearing about a 9th grade boy who spoke to our OWL students, our middle schoolers who are learning about human sexuality. He made the courageous decision to come out of the closet at his school and to talk to our OWL students about his experience. In this day and age, and in this community, I am pleased to say, such things are possible. But it's still a great risk in the world. I think of a man in a congregation I served named Bill. Bill was an openly gay man who worked with our young people. I've often wondered what sort of damage he may have prevented, just by being who he was with them. A high number of teen suicides and attempted suicides are still related to coming out as gay. Perhaps a boy would look at him and say, “If Mr. Kerr is a gay and he's a good man, then I can be, too.”

We may not resonate with the notion of letting our light “give glory to our father in heaven”, but it's just another way to talk about doing what Bill Kerr did - burning your light, spending yourself, for something greater than just you. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” is another way to say this. We sense somehow that it's kind of boring just to shine our light for ourselves. That's what the spiritual life is about – that's why we come to church – to find our connection to that bigger life. To find something that is worthy of burning our light for. The light that isn't just about us. It's not about me, I repeat to myself from time to time. For us Americans, it's a spiritual lesson we'll probably be working on for generations. It's not about you - and still burn your light. Mary Oliver writes, “Clearly I'm not needed, yet I find myself turning into something of inexplicable value.”

A week ago Saturday, Scott and I were helping conduct a funeral. We were called by someone

in our church on behalf of a couple he knew whose 2-year-old son had died of leukemia. He was certainly the light of his parents' life. They had given everything to the fight for his life. They moved from Washington, D.C. to the Ronald McDonald House at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota to devote full time to his recovery. The boy's mother and her parents quit their jobs. There are times in your life when you have to completely give yourself over to someone or something, and this was it for them. They burned their light for him. And now he was gone.

The family had originally requested just a few words at the cemetery – nothing special, nothing religious, they weren't religious people. Soon it became apparent that much more was needed. It became apparent that scores and scores of people were going to come. We sometimes don't know what a light we are, even in a brief span of time. They didn't fully get this about their son.

Need I tell you it was painful? A casket is not supposed to be so small. We ended with a large candle in the middle of a table to represent his life, and surrounded it with smaller tea candles. People were invited to come and light a candle from the larger one to express how his life touched their own. And so they came forward, silently, tearfully, some hesitantly. And when all 300 or so had come and lit a candle, we blew out the large candle, and said, "The light that was his life on earth has gone out; but look at the light he has left behind." It was beautiful. His grandmother ran out to the car to get her camera; no one thought there would be anything they would want a picture of. Even if you only live less than two years, you are light, those candles said. You touch the world.

Jesus looked at the crowd, and Buddha looked at the crowd, and they saw light. They were not speaking to people who already knew this. Notice that Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the powerful, the wealthy, the popular. Blessed are the handsome; blessed are the cool." He was speaking to the rest of us. You, whose marriage failed, or who remained single in a couple's world – you are light. You whose child is in jail, you are light. Your child is, too. You who work for a job you hate, who lost your job, – you are light. You are light when you don't like yourself very much, when you have failed. That's the miracle of the light – God in you – it's still there and it can be there, even against your will. Hiding it makes no sense; why waste something so precious? And yet we do. They didn't say you could be light some day if you worked hard at it, were good enough, or did something worthwhile with your life. You, now. Make of yourself a light. Every night a child is born is a holy night. You are the light of the world. Amen.