

## “Shining Lights”

Matthew 5:13-20

February 9, 2020

“You wouldn’t believe the way I was treated when I went to that church.” “I’ve seen the way that Christians act when they’re not at church.” “I believe in Jesus, but I do not attend a church, because the church is a bunch of hypocrites.” We certainly do not like to hear comments like that, because, after all, they’re talking about us. People in the church. It’s natural to feel defensive and we might be quick to point out, “Well, that’s not every church or every church member. Don’t let one bad experience convince you that all churches are bad.” But there’s probably some truth to those statements, so I’m sure we can see why some people might feel that way about the church. I think of the scandals that have devastated churches and caused people to walk away when they discover that church leaders were embezzling money, or that their pastor who they trusted was guilty of some sexual sin, or when their pastor who seemed to be so devoted to Jesus posts on social media that he has decided to walk away from Christianity. People who were part of a church remember their bad experiences with their fellow church members. How people stared at them when their child made too much noise during worship. Or how they were “welcomed” with someone saying, “Well, look who finally decided to show up at church today” when they were finally brave enough to come back. Those who have never been part of a church may see the way “church people” talk about and treat each other and think, “Why would I ever want to be part of that? I can worship Jesus without the church.”

Every one of those comments is hard for me to hear. And I think that it is hard for all of us to hear those type of comments, because Jesus gave His disciples and all of us a great compliment in our Gospel lesson from Matthew 5 when He said in verses 13-14, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” The reason that’s such a wonderful compliment is that salt and light are both important for survival. We all know that nothing can grow or live without light. Turn off the sunlight and the world would quickly die.

Salt is also a necessity of life and during the days of Jesus’ earthly life, salt was one of the most prized commodities in the land. In the days before refrigeration, salt was the primary way to preserve meat. When you need salt to preserve food but it is hard to find, then it takes on great value. In fact, salt was sometimes used for money. Even today we still refer to people who are hard workers as “worth their salt.”

So when Jesus said that His followers are salt and light, He was saying that Christians are essential for the survival of the world to preserve what is decent and oppose what is corrupt. We are supposed to be the shining lights of God’s saving grace, drawing people to come and see the great things that God has done for them. But instead of being that type of shiny attracting light, it seems that too often Christians are seen as an annoying flashing strobe light that people want to avoid. So what are we, the church, supposed to do? Is there anything that we can do?

Yes, we can begin by being honest and saying to people who have made those comments about Christianity and people in the church, “I’m sorry the church has disappointed you. I’m sorry that I or my fellow Christians have done or said something that obviously hurt you.” That’s not easy to admit, especially when we often want to point out someone else’s sin while ignoring the sins that we are committing ourselves. But the fact is the church is a pretty sick place. God’s honest diagnosis of our hearts and lives is not a good one in that the church is filled with people who are sick with sin.

But just like a good doctor, whose intention with diagnosing disease is so that he/she can treat it, so also our God makes the diagnosis of sin in us so that He can deliver the cure. And what is the cure? One word – grace – God’s undeserved love. It’s what Jesus showed throughout His entire ministry while here on earth as He went to people who were spiritually sick with sins of money laundering, bribery, adultery, and prostitution. But Jesus doesn’t go to them to make them feel better about their sin. He held out God’s grace to these people whose sin was going to cause them to die forever. Jesus offered the cure, not because their lives were so spiritually healthy, but because their lives were sinfully sick. As Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13)

And that’s what God’s grace has done for each of us. Jesus looked at our spiritually sick lives, He saw our hypocritical attitudes and our shadowy lives of love that have not always shined so brightly with good works, and Jesus performed the ultimate heart transplant. He took our sin-diseased and failing hearts and replaced it with His own – a heart that perfectly met God’s standard of love. Whenever that heart becomes diseased by the

sins that we daily fall into, it is Jesus who comes with His grace and makes our hearts clean again. He infuses our hearts with His love and declares us to be “sin-free” and right with God. As sinners here in the church we are contaminated with sin and we cannot purify ourselves. Only through Jesus’ death and resurrection are we pure, cleansed, and made holy. In other words, we are simply recipients of God’s grace – God’s undeserved love. And that’s what the church is – a place of God’s grace.

So what does that look like? Jesus said that we are “the light of the world and that a city on a hill cannot be hidden” meaning we were never meant to shine alone. We were meant to be together as a church. But the church is not a place where people are perfect and we have no problems. Instead, it is a place of honesty and love. It is a place where God’s grace leads us to be honest and loving with one another. God’s grace calls us not to turn a blind eye to sin, but to humbly address it with one another so that it might be diagnosed and treated with God’s forgiveness. God’s grace calls us to make judgments, not based on our personal opinions, or with a desire to embarrass someone, but with a love that desires to follow Jesus and help others to do the same. God’s grace calls us to treat one another with the same measure of undeserved love that God has shown to us, to struggle along-side of one another, and to encourage each other in our walk with God.

When we gather together for worship as a church family, for Bible study on Wednesday evening during Family Night, or in small group activities – such as our women’s circles, our Old Wiser Lutherans group, our high school students, our confirmation ministry, our Open Arms center, or our scouts – we help each other stay pure and we hold each other accountable, so that we are ready to go back into the world. That’s why it is important to be in the church, to be in worship and involved in a small group ministry. We cannot shine brightly on our own. We were designed to be together. God’s plan is for us to be a city on a hill, and when we shine together, we can effectively reach far out into the darkness of our sinful world with the love of Jesus.

The church is first and foremost about our relationship with Jesus through faith – a relationship that is all about God’s grace. And the more that we keep that grace of God at the forefront, the more it will influence our relationships with those inside and outside the church. It allows us to forgive more freely when someone does sin against us. It allows us to approach someone else’s sin with greater humility and patience. It creates in us a desire to follow Christ more closely in our lives outside the church so that others may come to see the undeserved love of God’s grace.

The church is not a place for perfect people. In fact, if you think you have found the perfect church and you join that church, then it will no longer be perfect, because you’re a sinner and I’m a sinner. We are people who need God’s grace, and the church is a place for God’s grace. It is a place where God honestly and lovingly comes to people, diagnoses and delivers the cure for sin. It is a place where God’s people are empowered to live honestly and lovingly with one another, and to be a shining witness to the world of God’s grace. A perfect place? No. Simply a place of God’s grace.