

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 5, 2017

Last Sunday we held the *Rite of Welcome*. People new to PRLC who wish to go deeper in their relationship with God and this community were welcomed as they are every year with the sign of the Cross traced on their bodies, bibles presented to them, prayers spoken over them and question asked of them.

So, last Sunday we asked our friends: “What do you seek from God’s church?”

A little later they were asked, “Will you be faithful in following the ways of Christ?”

Then you were asked to support them and welcome them into our common life and ministry.

These are big questions. They are primary questions getting to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus and worship God. They are questions of commitment seeking a response from inquirers and from you and me.

Last Sunday’s experience brought me back to a similar experience some years ago when I was serving the parish in California. We held the *Rite of Welcome*, very similar to what happens here and a couple of days later in a small group with people who had undergone the Rite along with their sponsor. We “unpacked” all that occurred.

One gentleman said he was nervous and more than a little reluctant to stand in front of everybody and respond to such weighty questions and to receive nothing less than the mark of the cross on his very body. That’s how he felt before the service. He also had a grand epiphany during the ritual. Suddenly, he said, it dawned on him that his Christian faith wasn’t a private matter as he was wont to believe. It is, in fact, very public. “Gosh,” he said, “as I was standing in front of the Assembly I had this realization that being a Christian is very public. There’s nothing private about this journey!”

Jesus would agree.

“You are the light of the world,” says Jesus. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a 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.”

This is Jesus' charge to us in Baptism. When you are presented with the lighted candle: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God."

I like Eugene Peterson's translation in the *Message* version of the Bible where we hear Jesus say it this way - "You're here to be light. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this. As public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, the generous Father in heaven."

Jesus calls us to go public. "Let your light shine," says Jesus. "Don't hide your light under a bushel basket."

As we like to sing, "this little of mine, I'm gonna let it shine ... shine all over the world."

But that seem ominous at times? Shining your light? Going public? Maybe, in fact, you do not feel as though you have a light to shine or maybe you feel your light is akin to a dimly burning wick. A mere flicker. Maybe you're not always sure you have much to give to the community of faith and our common witness.

We hear about the fast that delights God's heart - undoing the yoke of injustice, letting the oppressed go free. Many are crushed by oppression. The world yearns for justice. How can my little light contribute to God's work of loving the world? Do I have the strength it takes to be about this kind of work?

Feeling this way isn't all that uncommon. I would say it's pretty normal. We get easily overwhelmed by our calling in the world or life itself. I guess that's even more reason to listen to Jesus because Jesus' summons or call is finally a word of grace, a call to trust in Jesus and astonishing good news.

Jesus isn't asking us to dazzle the world with neon lights or conquer the world with flood lights. Jesus is really calling us to be ourselves - vessels through whom the light of Christ may shine.

In Matthew's Gospel, letting your light shine comes shortly after the Beatitudes. We heard them last week ... blessed are you who mourn, the meek, poor in spirit, persecuted for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Now, this is no description of spit and polished perfection or glamour. Those whom Jesus calls blessed would never make any top ten lists. Jesus calls blessed those who know their need of God. And this light is what the world so desperately needs.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he does not proclaim the good news with lofty words of wisdom but with the foolish message of Christ crucified. And this foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and this weakness is stronger than human strength.

Letting our light shine invites us into a posture of vulnerability and even sharing our weaknesses and there the light of the cross shines through with God's transforming love.

I have a friend who sponsors folks in recovery. She can let her light shine, she tells me, because she is a companion to people who are going through a journey much like her own. In sharing her very real self, in listening, my friend says her deep passion is meeting some of the world's deepest need.

Before his untimely death, Pastor Christensen talked to me about starting a grief group in the church for those whose loved ones had recently died. He was grieving deeply, as you know, over the death of his beloved Pat. It seemed to me that sharing that vulnerable space with others was a way of letting his light shine.

I had a friend who had Micah 6:8 posted on his wall at his place of work. The daily reminder, he told me, helped him approach his work as holy ground.

Let your light shine where you live, where you work, where you play. Share your real selves and even your vulnerable selves allowing the light of Christ to shine through.

Jesus charges us to go public not so much as spit and polished saints but saints who know something of what it means to be loved and to love just as we are.

Last Wednesday, Mayor Ed Murray invited people throughout the city to light candles at 7:00 p.m. in solidarity with those who are seeking to enter this nation but are in danger of being turned away and not welcomed, especially our Muslim friends. Many people across the city responded to the invitation, including a lot of churches and that included Phinney.

So, at “Bread for the Journey” last Wednesday all gathered outside with lighted candles singing and praying and going public. I noticed some of our neighbors walking by being very curious and intrigued and a few of them joining us! That was very cool. Maybe they caught a glimpse in that little demonstration of giving glory to God – small, flickering lights pointing to Jesus’ rich compassion.

Think back again to last Sunday and the Rite of Welcome. When the sponsor traced the sign of the Cross on the bodies of our sisters and brothers preparing for their journey to Easter, one area that was signed were the shoulders and these accompanying words: “Receive the cross on your shoulders and so bear the gentle yoke of Christ.” The gentle yoke of Christ.

That’s reminiscent of Jesus’ words later in Matthew’s Gospel: “Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus lifts the burden of oppression. Jesus lifts the burden of guilt. We do not take on a hard yoke in following Jesus. Perfection isn’t demanded, nor is it expected. No. We bear the yoke of one whose way is marked by love.

And with this we are called go public.

Let your light so shine Amen.