

Problem: What does it mean for me to share the light of Christ?

-There was a little game that I learned as a camp counselor which I often played with the kids to keep them occupied (usually “get-know-you” activity). It consisted of getting in a circle and the counselor starting off by saying: “I have a ball of light, something that is very special. I’m going to pass it around and let each of you have the chance to hold this light. Make sure you don’t drop it! But since each of us gets to hold this light, remember what it feels like to hold it. Toss it up, move it around, do some moves!” While this “ball of light” was passed around, the entire circle would copy the moves of each person while they held it. Of course, it became one of the most hilarious things you would ever see, especially with the younger grade school children. One 1st grade boy, I remember, did this robot dance and got so into it he dropped his hands which were holding the “ball of light.” As soon as he did this, about 5 kids came running to him and slid on their stomachs to “catch the light.” “Don’t drop it! Don’t drop it!”, they all exclaimed. The boy was so horrified in dropping this imaginary ball that I, as counselor, had to quickly name another camper who “caught the light” just in time so the game could go on. It was an amazing scene.

-As we read this next part of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus gives in the book of Matthew, I am struck by one of the main pieces of it: light. “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 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.” (verses 14-15).

- This isn’t the only piece of scripture that deals with light. Isaiah 9: 2 famously states: “The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.” Psalm 18:28 reads: “For it is you who light my lamp; the Lord my God lightens my darkness.” Ephesians 5:8 says: “for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.” And perhaps most famously: John 1:5 “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

-Light is a common symbol in scripture, but it is still challenging sometimes to make sense of it in our time and place. At least for me. How does God’s light shine in the darkness? How does God’s light shine through me? Maybe most importantly: what does it mean for me to share the light of Christ with others?

Solution: Sharing the light of Christ is an “on-the-ground” practice of getting our hands dirty.

-Throughout history, I think, particularly these verses in Matthew, have been interpreted through the lense of morality. What I mean by this is that moral acts and behavior have become synonymous with “bringing light into the darkness.” There isn’t anything wrong with this interpretation in itself, but what it started was leading the church and its

institutions in determining who was properly “in the light” through their behavior and who was in “darkness” by behavior that was not deemed appropriate. This interpretation and belief in “in a new morality” culminated in the settlement of the new world in the 17th century and westward expansion and settlement in the western United States during the 18th and 19th centuries which includes, of course, Montana. Sharing the light of Christ became instructions for proper behavior that social and institutional structures. The light was our “moral compass”, our lamp hoisted high on a ship guiding it through the fog.

-Again, I do think that morality and behavior is part of what it means to spread the light of Christ. It is important, especially for the church, to model and encourage behavior as Jesus Christ behaved. But I also think that when behavior and morality become the only thing that the church does in “spreading the light”, the light becomes something high above us that is used for judgement and not for love. We have seen all kinds of problems when “the light” gets too high above us, too separated, to much of moral test that no one, not even church leaders, can pass. Problems like sexual misconduct by pastors and priests, church institutions supporting things like Nazism, Apartheid, and Jim Crow laws. Maybe the light needs to come down from on high a few notches. Maybe it’s time for us in the church to see the light not as something high on the mountain on on the mast of ship, but more “on the ground” like with 1st graders trying not to drop their imaginary balls of light.

-There has historically been a lot of questions by scholars surrounding the Gospel of Matthew’s use of the term “Kingdom.” I think the way we see this term is important and can lead us to re-imagining how we can “bring the light down to earth” a little bit. Matthew plays around with this word a lot. Sometimes it is used in the phrase “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”. Sometimes it is used alone. What Matthew is doing here is comparing and contrasting “God’s Kingdom” with the earthly “Kingdom of Rome.” Jesus goes to great lengths to teach his disciples differences between these two entities: Kingdom of Rome is based on violent, militaristic power, Kingdom of Heaven is based on peace. Kingdom of Rome is based on a hierarchical structure with Cesar at the top, Kingdom of Heaven is based on “the least of these”. The Kingdom of Rome is based on intimidation, Kingdom of Heaven is based on love. You get the point. What the Jesus in Matthew is doing here is outlining a new social structure. A new form of community and relationship. So, because of this fact, a fair re-interpretation (substitutional word) for “Kingdom of Heaven” can be “Beloved Community.”

“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the *beloved community*; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the *beloved community*.” (Matthew 5:19)

-The interesting thing is that this new structure doesn’t begin when we die, but starts now: “Repent, for the *Beloved Community* is at hand” (Matthew 3:2)

Implication: How can OSLC share the light “on-the-ground” in more vulnerable ways?

-The gas fired water heater in our house is about 17 years old and needs replacement. We have been kicking around the idea of changing this water heater over to electric which can be a more environmentally sustainable way to heat water. Out of great generosity, our own Bill Rucks, a fantastic electrician in his own right, came over and helped me think through what would be involved to do something like this. He was in the basement crunching down, crawling around in crawlspace of our house, figuring out where all the old wiring in our house goes and brainstorming ways this could be a solution. Of course our basement is pretty dark, so he needed a flashlight most of the time to see anything. For me, not having any idea how an electric water system would work, this flashlight that Bill held was the light of Christ. Bill was modeling for me the “beloved community”. It wasn’t on some hill top way above the people, it was down in the basement and crawlspace of our old house.

-My friends, our church can be the light of Christ and modeling “beloved community” in much the same way. We can be that camp counselor who reminds the first grader that he still has the light no matter what. We can be in the dark crawlspaces of people’s lives showing that new relationship is still possible.

-In a few moments after our singing of the Hymn of the Day, I want to try something new that might help us share the light of Christ. After the hymn of the day, I want you to take 5 minutes in our worship, and turn to somebody next to you (try to not let it be the person who you came to church with). Introduce yourself if you don’t know them and then, if you feel comfortable, share with them 2 things: 1) a “high” of your week (something that was really positive), and 2) a “low” of your week (something that was perhaps a negative). After 5 minutes, we will continue with worship and the “Prayers of the People.” If you are comfortable, you can pray for your partner in something in that time. If not, you can also pray for them during the week if you feel it necessary.

-What I hope this “High’s and Low’s” time can be a way for us as a community of faith to witness the light to each other “down on the ground”. It can be a way for us to practice a new way of “beloved community” with each other and with the world. Give me your feedback on how it went, of course.

-May the light of Christ be in you always and may you find new ways to share that light “on-the-ground” with others who really need it. Amen.