

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 9, The 5th Sunday of Epiphany/The 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

“THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE”

This morning I'd like to start with a couple questions: How many of you children and teens here this morning knows the song: “This Little Light of Mine”?

And for you adults, how many of you learned “This Little Light of Mine” when you were a child?

How many of you learned it as an adult, or when you came to America from Togo?

I find that whenever I sing this song, I always feel joyful. Partly I think it's because I've been singing it for most of my life. It brings back memories of singing in the first Sunday School room can remember when I was about 5. It was a big upstairs room with all the Kindergarten to 3rd graders together, seated in rows on our little chairs. After singing we went into our individual classrooms to learn Bible Stories and do crafts. I loved the singing best. This Little Light of Mind sunk into my heart early.

I remember singing it at Cardai Hill Church Camp above the Columbia River that I went to through 9th grade. And then all the years when I was leading singing with all the Sunday School and Vacation Bible School children.

I'm also reminded of all the World Communion Sundays when we've sung it together circling the sanctuary.

“This Little Light of Mine” also feels joyful to me because whenever I sing it with a group of people, including you, it feels like shining our lights for Jesus is something we really can do together. It feels like nothing can get in our way.

I believe it brings us back to the childlike faith Jesus calls to have.

It's the kind of faith that loves Jesus and wants to shine his light everywhere.

In your bulletins you'll find a yellow insert with the song lyrics and this morning's scripture readings on it. Will you please take it out now and join me in singing the 1st and 2nd verses? And remember you must have your light (index finger) up in the air. Because this song just can't be sung by God's children without the hand motions!

1. *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

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

2. *Down in my heart, I'm gonna let it shine (Repeat 3 times)*

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

I have always thought that this song was an African American spiritual, coming out of the time of slavery. But it actually comes from a later time in history. It was written by a man named Harry Dixon Loes in about 1920, so it is only 100 years old.

Mr. Loes, studied at the Moody Bible Institute and the American Conservatory of Music. He was a musical composer, and teacher, who wrote other gospel songs as well.

By 1939 it had become a part of folk music collections. As I started to learn more about this song this week, I found so many different verses that have been written. The ones we'll sing this morning are only a few of them.

Eventually "This Little Light of Mine" found its way into the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and '60's. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_Little_Light_of_Mine)

It is a song that the prophet Isaiah would have appreciated. God spoke through Isaiah to tell the Israelites how to live lives that honored God. This morning's reading from Isaiah 58 is one of the places in the Bible where God reminds us of the responsibilities of faith. God wanted the Israelites to know, and wants us to know, that going through the motions of faith and worship isn't enough.

The truth of our faith and our worship show up in how we live daily

If we're going let our lights shine, it needs to be happening all the time.

Through Isaiah God speaks the words you'll find on your handout, from Isaiah 58. Please keep your bulletin out so you can pray with Charles, and then use the handout for the reading.

These words were spoken to the congregation of Israel then and to our congregation this morning:

Isaiah 58:1-12 (The Contemporary English Version)

Worship Leader: (The Lord says) ¹Shout the message! Don't hold back. Say to my people Israel: You've sinned! You've turned against the Lord. ²Day after day, you worship him and seem eager to learn his teachings. You act like a nation that wants to do right by obeying his laws. You ask him about justice, and say you enjoy worshipping the Lord. ³You wonder why the Lord pays no attention when you go without eating and act humble. But on those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves and abuse your workers. ⁴You even get angry and ready to fight. No wonder God won't listen to your prayers! ⁵Do you think the Lord wants you to give up eating and to act as humble as a bent-over bush? Or to dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes? Is this really what he wants on a day of worship?

Please read the next verses with me:

(Unison) ⁶I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD.

Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly.

Free those who are abused!

**⁷Share your food with everyone who is hungry;
share your home with the poor and homeless.**

**Give clothes to those in need;
don't turn away your relatives.**

⁸Then your light will shine like the dawning sun, and you will quickly be healed.

**Your honesty will protect you as you advance,
and the glory of the LORD will defend you from behind.**

⁹When you beg the LORD for help, he will answer, "Here I am!"

Don't mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel.

¹⁰Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless.

Then your light will shine in the dark; your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun.

¹¹ The Lord will always guide you and provide good things to eat when you are in the desert.

He will make you healthy. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water or like a stream that never runs dry.

¹²You will rebuild those houses left in ruins for years; you will be known as a builder and repairer of city walls and streets.

Please join me in singing verses 3-5.

3. *Out into the dark. I'm gonna let it shine (Repeat 3 times)*
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

4. *All around my neighborhood, I'm gonna let it shine (Repeat 3 times)*
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

5. *All around the world, I'm gonna let it shine (Repeat 3 times)*
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

This morning's reading from Matthew is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the beginning of Matthew 5 which contains the Beatitudes, or the blessings.

Now we continue Jesus' teachings with these words, will you pick up your bulletin insert and read verses 13-16 with me:

Matthew 5:13-20, The Contemporary English Version

(Unison) ¹³You are like salt for everyone on earth.

But if salt no longer tastes like salt, how can it make food salty?

All it is good for is to be thrown out and walked on.

¹⁴You are like light for the whole world.

A city built on top of a hill cannot be hidden,

¹⁵and no one would light a lamp and put it under a clay pot.

A lamp is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house.

¹⁶Make your light shine,

so that others will see the good that you do
and will praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus then returns to the Old Testament Laws that all his audience would have known. He is telling them that he is the same God they met in the Old Testament. The God who calls them to love God by loving others and serving those in need.

Jesus says: ¹⁷Don't suppose that I came to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning. ¹⁸Heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you that not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen. ¹⁹If you reject even the least important command in the Law and teach others to do the same, you will be the least important person in the kingdom of heaven. But if you obey and teach others its commands, you will have an important place in the kingdom. ²⁰You must obey God's commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law obey them. If you don't, I promise you that you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus calls us to be faithful by being salt and light. So, this week I learned some things about salt. For over a century there was a salt institute that spoke for salt, and although they closed in 2019

after a century of promoting salt, I was still able to read some of their information.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2019/03/30/707747077/after-a-century-a-voice-for-the-u-s-salt-industry-goes-quiet>

They asserted that “Salt's profound impact on human civilization spans recorded history... and precedes it. Salt has influenced human existence virtually from the beginning. Neolithic settlements were at salt springs. Caravans trekked deserts trading salt ounce-for-ounce for gold. Most cultures have folklore and art forms based on salt. And many cultures share traditions such as offering bread and salt to welcome visitors.” <http://www.saltinstitute.org/Uses-benefits/Salt-in-history>

In both Old Testament and New Testament times salt was used to preserve food. It was an essential part of life. It gave families and communities the ability to store food, and it made long-distance travel possible.

During the Roman Empire, before and after Jesus' day it is commonly believed that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid with salt. The word 'salary' derives from the Latin word *salārium*, and may have referred to the money given to soldiers so they could buy salt.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_salt

And Jesus said: “You are like salt for everyone on earth. But if salt no longer tastes like salt, how can it make food salty?”

Jesus says, you are essential to the life of faith for others.

You are essential to bring the flavor of Christ to the journey of faith for those God puts on your path.

If you are not flavoring life around you with the salty, flavorful love of God then how is your blandness going to help anyone?

Then Jesus gives us another picture to help us understand how much each one of us is needed when Jesus says you are light for the world, like a city set on a hill.

I grew up in cities and suburbs, so I never fully appreciated this verse until I went to my first year of college in Walla Walla Washington, in the eastern side of the state. Walla Walla (a town so nice they named it twice!) is a small city, and once you drive outside of it you are surrounded by wheat and pea fields. One night late I was driving back to campus with friends. The darkness was a bit overwhelming to me because I'd always had street lights and highway lights as part of my night sky.

But out in the fields around town in was pitch black. Until on the horizon it looked like a dome of light filling the sky above Walla Walla.

How many of you have ever been driving way out in the country and as you got closer to a town, or closer to the Quad Cities you could see what looked like a dome of light on the horizon?

Especially for those of us who are city dwellers it gives us feeling of homecoming to know we are getting back to a place where it is light enough to see, even at night.

Jesus says we are to be like that beacon of light, that inviting light that shines in the darkness, so people can see Christ.

Bringing his words forward to our time and place, Jesus says that we would never invite people over to our home and leave all the lights off, expecting them to find their way in the dark.

We would turn all the lights on to welcome people and help them find their way.

Jesus says: "Make your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven. "

Jesus isn't saying, turn the spotlight on yourself so everyone can see how holy you are. He is saying let your life and your living be the light that points others to Jesus.

The poet Edward Guest wrote during the 1st part of the 20th century and part of his poem "Sermons We See" says this:

*I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;
And the best of all the preachers are the (ones) ~~men~~ who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.*

St. Francis of Assisi said: "Preach always. If necessary, use words."

And what does that preaching look like? What does it look like when we preach always and if necessary use words? If you turn back to Isaiah 58 you have the list. He told God's people then and he tells us now:

"I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD," or in Jesus' words to be salt and light: "Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly.

Free those who are abused!

Share your food with everyone who is hungry;
share your home with the poor and homeless.

Give clothes to those in need;
don't turn away your relatives.

Then your light will shine like the dawning sun!"

As Jesus' salty saints and inviting lights, please join me in singing the final verses on your insert. Jesus told us to have childlike faith, so let us stand and sing with the joy and faith of the children who lead us on this path:

6. *Well Jesus gave me light, I'm going to let it shine (Repeat 3 times)
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

7. *Hide it under a bushel - NO!, I'm gonna let it shine. (Repeat 3 times)
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

8. *I'll be Jesus' salt, flavoring my world
I'll be light for him, shining in the world
I'll be salt and light, Jesus help me shine
Help me shine, help me shine, help me shine*

9. *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine (Repeat 3 times)
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

cf:11-06-02