

1 Timothy 6: 6-19
Matthew 5: 14-16
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
September 29, 2013

Among the many limitations of the English language is the fact that there is no difference between the singular and plural form of “you”. Thus when Jesus says “you are the light of the world” and “let your light so shine before people” our first reaction tends to think of *my* light. We may be excused for this way of hearing because we live in a highly individualistic culture. Then there is also the fact that since childhood we have sung “This little light of *mine*, I’m gonna let it shine.”

But the fact is that when Jesus speaks “you” he means the disciples and the crowds of people gathered to hear him. This is the collective “you”; and by it Jesus intends that the light of God while shining in and through individual lives is meant to link with other lights to create a great light that cannot be hidden.

Thus the Puritans who colonized Massachusetts Bay thought of themselves as a City on a Hill whose spiritual light could be seen clear across the Atlantic Ocean to (in their eyes) the corrupt Church of England. They knew what Jesus knew and we have forgotten: that one candle can be blown out by a strong wind. A community of candles cannot so easily be extinguished. When one candle is blown out it is reignited by the flame of the community. Thus when Jesus says, “Let your light shine among people” the word light is *singular*. The light of a community shines one light which is stronger, brighter and more durable than any one individual light.

Nevertheless, the collective witness of light is made of many individual candles. Every single candle contributes to the shining of the whole. Every one counts.

I begin this way because we are beginning our annual focus on the financial support of Christ's ministry at Hamilton Union. This is not a time for doing what we have always done. This is not a time of routine filling out a form and sending it in. The invitation to support the ministry of Jesus Christ is not one cause of many we support. It is connected to the deepest meanings of our lives. The prayerful consideration of our individual financial support is a profoundly spiritual act. It is a witness to the importance we set on the witness to Jesus Christ in this world of ours. Your individual decision regarding the importance of Christ's light shining in the world through this one small community of faith is a concrete witness to your faith.

Witness to the importance of the Gospel to this fragmented and broken world of ours has nothing to do with the amount of money you or I give. What matters is what it *means* to us. What matters is that what we give matters...to us! What matters is that through giving we give testimony that the values of this world are not necessarily *our* values. We witness to a fact which is idiocy to the world: that our peace, security and contentment lie in our faith in the love and provision of God in Jesus Christ. When we intentionally undermine our dependence on money and things to provide us a deeper security we discover that we are provided for. Things we thought we needed to be happy are not important any more. The stress of being afraid of what will happen if starts to lift and we have renewed energy for life. In the words of Paul to Timothy, we begin to experience "the life that really is life."

I apply this to my own individual life and also to the life of the church. What is our purpose as a community of faith? After all, we are set upon a hill. This congregation has in one form or another been witnessing to Jesus Christ for over two hundred years: from the days of the Great Western Turnpike to the overcrowded Western Avenue. From the octagonal building

of the 1790's to our current ministry space how many million people have passed by? What do they see when they go by? What associations do they have with what goes on in this building on a hill? What do we want those thoughts and associations to be? How do we communicate the light that shines from the community of lamps which is Hamilton Union?

To approach this question I believe we need to begin with what has drawn us to the light of Christ that shines in and through this community. What is it for you? I suspect that for many of you there is how the light drew you in the first place; then there is the light that continues to draw you and brings light to your life and our life together.

Let me give a short personal testimony. Eight and a half years ago I was seeking a new call after twenty years of ministry with my previous congregation. I was like someone who was back on the street looking for a new relationship after the end of a long time partnership. How do you do this? How do I present myself? How do I recognize the right setting? More than that in reality this was my first call to a solo pastorate after twenty-four ministry. Would anyone want just me without MJ? My one unstated question to every Pastor Nominating Committee was, "Can I be myself here?"

When I met the PNC I was completely at ease. Their complicated agenda for their new minister was simply this: "Get to know us." Light was shining. After arriving home I received a call from Bill Morris saying that they were very enthusiastic about my candidacy. But they had a little concern. When I preached at the neutral pulpit I didn't seem to make eye contact. Was I aware of this? I was floored. I had expected a question about my position on human sexuality or abortion or why I was a Red Sox fan. After stumbling through some explanations I blurted

out, I was nervous! There was laughter at the other end. Bill thanked me and hung up. A little while later he called back.

I tell this story because it models for me the shining of true light. An acceptance of humanity but a serious concern about, among other things, how a pastor deals with feedback that is not 100% favorable. You took me as I was. That was the light that drew me. It is the light that still draws me with the additional fact that Christ's love in and through you has allowed me to grow and experience new dimensions of faith. You have challenged me to think more broadly and deeply. I believe that we have grown in Christ together and are doing things that we might never have imagined eight years ago. This year has been an amazing one for me all possible due to your lovingly giving me a sabbatical. We have learned much together. Our desire to serve Jesus Christ has taken a great leap in the past year. I refer to our Good News as the newsletter of my 500 member church. The light shines from this church on the hill.

Yet there are two dimensions of this light that are important. The first is that the light is not only for ourselves it is for others. How many people who drive by our church on a daily basis live in a world where they believe no one cares or can offer compassion, love and point to a path to God? We do this in part through our spiritual practice of setting aside money so that our witness to the power of God in and through Jesus Christ becomes visible through the worship, fellowship and mission of this community of faith.

Yet equally important is the fact that we pay attention to the light that shines in us. We keep our lamps filled with oil ready to supply oil to those whose flames are flickering; so that we help one another grow the light of Christ as individual disciples and as a people of God.
Amen.