

Worklights

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February 5, 2017 (Epiphany 5, Year A [Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20])

St. Andrew's Westridge

Last weekend we were at my friend Steve's house for dinner. There were six kids six and under, and four tired parents huddled around a bottle of wine. So naturally, we sent the kids, and accompanying crazy, outside. This worked well until about 6:15 or so, when it became too dark and the kids came inside. When they came inside, Steve immediately went outside. He returned a couple minutes later, and told all the kids to go back outside, for behold, it was light outside again.

What Steve had done was take a worklight, one of those real bright halogen lights that rests on a stand, and set it up so that it was shining into the yard. I don't know that any of the kids ever noticed or paid any attention to the light itself — but it made their world (and the adults' evening) so much better. Those kids were walking in darkness, and suddenly they saw a great light. They walked in deep darkness; on them a light had shined.

Today we're going to look at Jesus' famous metaphor, "You are the light of the world." My goal is to get you to think of yourself this week, not as some flickering candle in a dark corner of some chapel, but as a big ol' halogen worklight sitting atop a stand.

Jesus' language about the light is a great call to us, a great opportunity. But I don't think Jesus was merely holding it up as some goal — like if you work hard enough, here's how to get a spiritual A+. Look with me there in verse 14. He doesn't say, "You can be the light of the world," or "You really should be the light of the world," he just says, "You are the light of the world." This is normative; this is what a Christian life is supposed to be. He goes in on verse 15, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house."

Now I can imagine — though I don't know for what purpose — I can imagine taking an IKEA desk lamp and sticking under a big basket. But in Jesus' world, lamps did not plug in. Lamps were made of fire; they were oil lamps, little bowls of oil with a wick sticking out. So if your lamp was under a bushel basket then either (a) your house was on fire or (b) your lamp wasn't actually lit.

This is not a Schroedinger's cat situation; Jesus is saying if your lamp is really lit, it's not going to be hidden. If your following Jesus but no one can tell, then you're not

really following Jesus.

Our Isaiah passage takes it a step further; God's complaint against the people is that though their external religious observance is apparent (the fasting, sacrifice, and prayers), they weren't addressing the injustice and oppression suffered by their neighbors. No matter how good a person's religious rituals, without righteousness one is false towards God.

We simply are to be lights in the world. The sort permanently wired into the on position.

If you're not a big fan of this metaphor, it may be because you've encountered some Christians shining light the wrong way. Some people shine their light like a toddler wielding a flashlight, which is to say they go around shining it in other people's eyes. Oh my gracious; how obnoxious is it when someone shine's a flashlight directly in your eyes. "Kid! I know you have a flashlight. You don't need to point it in my eyes!"

You know people that behave like this too. People who make a point of making sure that they know that you know what good work they are doing. The sort where when you ask idly, "How's it going?" the reply comes back, "Well, the Lord's been keeping me busy; raised some money for an orphanage in Africa, worked down that homeless shelter last night, and helped a handicapped person cross the street this morning." Fantastic, you think. I haven't even finished doing the dishes.

There are other people who shine their lights like those big examination lights in the doctor's office. You know the one's that look like UFO's floating above whatever torturous half-table half-chair contraption they put you in. These people use their lights, their good works, to examine those they're helping for signs of defect and sickness. Serving at the food pantry and judging what sort of cars the clients are driving; helping fix up a house and examining whether the occupant really deserves disability assistance.

Then there are those of us who have some sort of strobe light, out there in the world thinking we're throwing some sort of good works disco dance, complete with "oonce, oonce, oonce" music. Really, we're just being inconsistent; sometimes lit up doing good, sometimes not. We're like a flickering florescent light driving people nuts.

But what if you're on the other end of this equation, not overly proud of your light, but instead saying to yourself, "I'm not a lamp worth looking at."

Ok, true enough. We're not all Tiffany Lamps. Tiffany Lamps are these beautiful art deco style lamps in which the shade is made of pieces of stained glass soldered together. They are beautiful and ornate; and actually, their beauty can obscure

much of the light production. They are works of art more than effective tools of illumination.

So if you don't feel like you have a Tiffany Lamp sort of life, that's just fine. For the purposes of lighting up the world, of "giving light to all in the house," as Jesus put it, better to be a worklight on a stand anyway.

One of Henry's very first words was "light." At the age of one, like lots of little kids, he loved lights. We took him to a light store once; he nearly lost his little mind. But by the time he was two, he completely stopped looking at lights. We know, even as very young children, not to look directly at the lights, but to look at what the light illuminates. The point of our being lamps is not for people to stare at us, but to stare at what our lives illuminate by our good works.

And what will be illuminated is what has been hiding in the darkness, hidden from sight because no light had fallen on it.

Our Isaiah passage, like our gospel, uses this metaphor of our good works in the world being like light. When you do what the Lord commands, the prophet tells the people, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn" (Is 58:8). But I want to back up a verse, and look in verse 7, at the four categories of people on whom the light of those good works will shine. Let's look at these together quickly.

The Lord God, remember, is describing the sort of fast that he would choose; verse seven continues the logic of verse six... "Is this not that fast that I choose.

First, "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry." It is no accident that at St. Andrew's we have a lot of feeding ministries: BlessMobile, Taco Tuesday, Burks Backpacks, Angel Food. Much of our core Hands & Feet work involves feeding people, and this is because there are a lot of hungry people, especially hungry kids. We can help; we can, and we do shine light upon the hunger of the world.

Next, is the fast of the Lord's choosing not "to bring the homeless poor into your house."

I heard from a woman lately who did this literally with a homeless guy she met in a parking lot. Pretty soon, the homeless poor's homeless girlfriend was in the house too. And the homeless poor's homeless dog. And the homeless poor turned out to be a convicted felon. Not an ideal situation. My point is that our social structures have changed a good bit since the first century; and the literal housing of random strangers may not be the best solution.

But there are many families, all over this city, hosting a homeless brother or sister or nephew or cousin or friend or even stranger on a couch in their house. This does happen literally, all the time.

There are also those like the McEachern family in our own church, who have for eighteen months housed little Marshall as his foster parents. Can't you hear the Lord saying, Is this not the fast that I choose, to change the poopy diaper of someone else's kid?"

And as a society, there are the homeless poor that come to us as refugees. I know this is a bit of a hot potato, I'll just say this. My own faith, my ministry, and my sense of God's mercy and power in the world would be poorer if people in this country hadn't taken care of those homeless poor that came to us as refugees. Two in particular, Mother Samira Izadi from Iran, and Fr. Deng Alaak Pager from the Sudan, have done remarkable, miraculous work for the church of Christ; and they have blessed me personally and our church broadly in powerful ways. They have been light in my life; I am thankful to live in a country that proved light to them, and pray that we may find a way to continue to do so.

So, the hungry and the homeless. Next, the naked. "When you see the naked, to cover them." Especially in winter there are those who maybe lack the warm things they need, but honestly, overall in this country, we are really good at clothes. We are good enough at clothes in America that we can ship huge containers of used and extra clothes to Africa. Nakedness is not a primary social ill around here.

But what about those whose shame is nakedly bare to the world. Men who haven't been able to keep a job, women and children who wear the bruises of abuse on their faces, those who have gotten pregnant by men who didn't love them, addicts who can't get sober, teenagers whose private pictures go viral at school. People whom the world has stripped bare and to stare at.

Can we as followers of Christ cover them? Can we stop calling them weak, slutty, impotent, and stupid? Can we look up from their nakedness long enough to look in their eyes and love? Can we cover the naked when we see them?

Last, our kin. "Not to hide yourself from your own kin." The Hebrew word translated "your own kin" literally means something like "your own flesh." Your family. One of the painful privileges of being a pastor is seeing just how hard this is for people. And I know it's complicated.

But I also know some of y'all need to hear this today. You want to run and hide; you want to disavow the relationship with your kin, not to mention their crazy political opinions. How many of you would rather help a hundred hungry homeless naked people before listening to Great Uncle Wilbur pontificate about politics through his dentures. I got one of those...

Teenagers do hide themselves from their parents; parents do turn around and hide from their parents, entrusting them to the nurses at the senior care facility; sisters

hide from brothers. I'm not saying you're doing it; but it happens. The Lord knows this; the Bible knows this. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes, the "good works" we really need to do are the ones right in front of us with the people who drive us the most crazy. Sometimes the darkest place in our lives, the place most in need of light, is pretty close to home.

So Isaiah, in this one little verse, gives us plenty of opportunities for light shining. Surely we could add more, but this one little verse is a pretty good start.

Finally, and I'll close with this, we must remember the reason we are called to shine as worklights upon the world. Jesus says it at the end of verse 16, "So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." This is for God's glory.

It's not for our own glory. I'm going to assume that's pretty obvious. Think about my friend Steve — he didn't set up that worklight so that I would admire his industrial lighting collection.

It's not even for the works themselves. This is less obvious, because there is an intrinsic good in serving others, in shining light into places of darkness in this world. But that's not the ultimate reason Jesus gives. Doing good works for the works themselves would be like Steve setting up the worklight to light up the yard. That's wasn't the ultimate reason.

Steve setup that worklight so that the kids could play.

The reason for us to shine as the light of the world is so that others may, by those good works, come to know and give glory to God. Which is even a little better than playing. May we light up the world, to the glory of God. Amen.