

Flip the Switch

Bruce Hedgepeth

Matthew 5:13-16

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Light in the Darkness

Given that our sermon series this summer is entitled “The Gospel According to Baseball,” I wonder if you can guess which big league team is my favorite. I’m going to give you a few clues to see if you can figure it out.

Here goes: this team is one of the two oldest teams in Major League Baseball. Hmmm – probably not many of us know that bit of baseball trivia. Next: this team’s ballpark is the second oldest still in use in the big leagues. That might narrow it down for some of us. Okay, this clue could clinch it for you: this team has gone the longest time of any major sports team without winning a world championship. Many of you have probably guessed that my favorite baseball team is who? That’s right – it’s those loveable losers, the Chicago Cubs.

They haven’t won a World Series since 1908. Even though they’ve been around as long as any other team, even though they’ve played in the “friendly confines” of Wrigley Field since 1916, even though their players have learned how to deal with ivy-covered walls in the outfield, even though they’ve fielded good teams in almost every decade, the Cubbies have not won a championship for 104 years. That’s a long dry spell for us Cub fans.

But do you know what else was a long-time coming to Wrigley Field? Let me give you a hint: they flipped the switch for the first time on August 8, 1988. That’s right – it was lights. Wrigley Field was the last major league park to have lights installed so they can play games at night. You may know the story: the baseball powers insisted that Wrigley Field be retrofitted with lights or else any post-season games the Cubs might play would be moved to Busch Stadium, the home field of the Cubbies hated rivals – the St. Louis Cardinals. Now given the Cubs’ history of futility, I’m not sure why that was such a big threat, but it got the desired result. The lights were installed and have been shining at Wrigley Field for nearly 25 years.

This morning we’re turning our attention to shining the light in a different way. Jesus talked about it in the verses we read from the Sermon on the Mount:

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 they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

That’s what I’d like for us to consider together: how can we do more to allow the light of Christ that’s in us to shine into the community around us?

Many of us are aware that there’s already lots of light shining at Church of the Palms. I mean, we offer three different worship services each week – two traditional and one modern. We have opportunities for learning and fellowship for all ages. We are active in serving those in need in our community through our Food Pantry and tutoring ministry and the Day of Hope and in lots of other ways.

However, during any given week most people in our community are not here at our church. In fact, they’re not at any church. They don’t tune on to Comcast channel 189 at 9:00 to watch the sanctuary

service. Most people in our community are not impacted by our efforts to meet human needs around us in Jesus' name. They don't see the light. Even though it brings us joy to share the light of Christ in so many ways, most people never see it.

Shiners of the Light

So what can we do? I mean, Jesus said we are the light of the world. Of course, we want his light to shine out from Church of the Palms and touch people in a way that helps them to experience God's love for them in Christ. How can we keep our light from seeming hidden under a bushel? That's the question.

It's a question that we've been wrestling with for quite some time around here. I've spoken with long-time members and leaders in our congregation who are wondering why a large church like ours, an active and compassionate church like ours, a church that is prominently located on a major street, a church that reaches out by broadcasting worship on television, why are we invisible to so many people in our community? And what can we do about it?

Let's look back at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It's important for us to notice who the Master addressed with the challenge of being the light of the world. It was the whole crowd that gathered to listen to him. It wasn't just the twelve disciples – those who were closest to him. It was everyone. Jesus wanted all those who heard his words to flip the switch, to be shiners of the light. He was their rabbi, their teacher, their leader, but he gave responsibility for shining his light to all the regular folks who gathered that day on the mountainside.

The same thing is true today. Pastor Steve can be the main interpreter of God's Word for you. I can help keep us organized to be about the ministry and mission the Lord calls us to do. Pastor Hmingi can make sure we're caring for one another. Carolyn can help us become equipped followers of Christ. Laurie can make sure we're ministering to our children, youth, and families. John can make sure our services here in the sanctuary are worshipful. But none of us can do the very important ministry of shining the light as well as you can.

You see, we don't have the connections you have. We don't know the people in the community you know. We don't run our own business, or teach in a school, or serve in the community organizations you do. You have access to so many people in our community who aren't here to experience the light of Christ. You are the biggest hero in this very important ministry that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount because of your relationships with friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and acquaintances. You are the light of the world.

Please understand – I'm not trying to pass the buck. I'm simply being realistic about the limitations of our church staff and about your great potential to change lives for Christ. Here are some amazing statistics. A research organization called Church Growth, Inc. has found that less than 1% of Christians came to faith through an evangelistic crusade. Church services and programs account for another 3%. The ministry of pastors: 6% of believers attribute their faith in Christ to the ministry of a pastor. Guess what's the greatest influence – by far? It is friends and relatives. Seventy-eight percent of believers follow Jesus because of the influence of a friend or a family member. That's why Jesus said, "You are the light of the world."

Invitation to Illumination

Here's what we're planning in order to help you shine the light of Christ. In just a few weeks, on July 14, we'll begin offering something called Lifetree Café on Sunday mornings from 10:15 – 11:00 over in the

Campus Center. Lifetree isn't like a restaurant café; it's more like a conversation café. It's a weekly experience in which folks come together to learn about and talk about a different, interesting topic. For example, recently at other Lifetree Café locations, they've discussed things like: "Imperfect Parents: Making Peace and Moving On;" "How to Stop Doing the Things You Hate;" and "Kids without a Country: An Illegal Immigrant's Story."

But rather than me trying to describe for you what Lifetree looks like, let's watch this video clip so you can see it for yourself.

(Run the video clip here, please)

Each week the topic is different, but the feel is similar. There is a compelling story told with a DVD. There is a facilitator, called the Host, who sets the tone and guides the participants through their time together. There is conversation around tables among the participants. Each week, Lifetree is structured so that the topic connects with scripture and with God.

Even though our plan is to begin Lifetree Café here on campus on Sunday mornings, we believe that will be just the first step. As we grow the number of people involved in and excited by the opportunities that Lifetree creates to shine the light of Christ, we will offer a second Lifetree each week at a location off the church campus and at a time when folks in the community would be likely to come – like Wednesday over the noon hour at a location downtown, or Tuesday evening in a storefront on Tamiami Trail.

So this is an invitation for you to participate in this adventure of flipping the switch here at Church of the Palms and get involved with shining the light of Christ in a new way – right here in our community. On page 7 of the bulletin this morning, you'll find a page on which you can indicate your interest in Lifetree Café. Please take a few seconds to fill it out before you leave this morning or drop it off at the church office this week.

On the evening of August 8, 1988, a 91-year-old man named Harry Grossman, who at the time was the Cubs' oldest season ticket holder, was asked to do the honors. He led the entire crowd gathered at Wrigley Field that night in chanting, "One, two, three, let there be light!" Then he flipped the switch and the ballpark was flooded with 110,000 watts of light, enabling the Cubs to play the Philadelphia Phillies in the first major league night game in that historic stadium. Whether you are 91, like Mr. Grossman, or 19, Jesus says to you: "You are the light of the world." Let's flip the switch and see what happens.