

Shine

Sermon text: Matthew 5:14-16

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I. Light in the darkness

Humor me this morning by tolerating a little pastor trivia. Here is a list of religious preferences that the Gallup organization uses when they poll Americans on a variety of issues. So based on the most recent Gallup poll what percentage of people do you think identify themselves as Protestant? It's 41%. There is an additional 10% who claim the affiliation of "Christian (non-specific)." How about Catholic? Twenty-three percent. Eight percent claim another religious preference, and 14% of Americans claim no religious affiliation.

Which of these groups, do you think has grown the most in recent years? It's the group with no religious affiliation, or the "nones" as they have come to be called. Among some subsets of the population, such as young adults, nearly one-third of the respondents are "nones."

Still, even with a growing percentage of the population with no religious affiliation, nearly 75% of us claim some type of Christian identity. Yet research consistently finds that only a little over 40% of us report that we participate regularly in worship services. Let's take a look at this video clip to find out what some people on the street had to say on a Sunday morning when asked why they weren't in church.

(Run the video clip here, please)

That's part of the reason why The Garden exists as a worship service: to address some of the issues that people have about participating in a traditional church. In fact, a few years ago when our Leadership Team worked on wrapping some words around the purpose of The Garden, here's part of what we said: "The Garden at Church of the Palms exists to engage those who desire to deepen their relationship with God, especially those seeking a relationship again or for the first time..."

In other words, we want to connect with the folks in our community who are not involved in any family of faith. Part of our purpose for being here in The Garden is to let the light of our faith in Jesus shine out to others. It's related to what the Lord talked about at one point in his Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5:14-16 says:

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.

Given the purpose of The Garden, I'd like for us to consider how we can 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 ones in the sanctuary and our modern service here in The Garden. 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 see the light. Even though it brings us joy to share the light of Christ in so many ways, most people never see it.

II. 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 The Garden at 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, why are we invisible to so many people in our community? And what can we do about it?

Looking 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 shine the light of their faith. He was their rabbi, their teacher, their leader, but he gave responsibility for shining his light to all the people who gathered that day on the mountainside.

The same thing is true today. Pastor Joe 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. Megan can lead us in inspiring modern worship. Laurie can make sure we're ministering to our children, youth, and families. 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 just being realistic about the limitations of our 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."

III. Invitation to illumination

And we'd like to help you shine the light of Christ. In just a few weeks, we're planning to begin offering Lifetree Café at the Nightlife Center down on Stickney Point Road on Tuesday evenings from 7:00 – 8:00. It will be very similar to the Lifetree Café we've been offering here at church on Sunday mornings from 10:15 – 11:15 in this room. But we're extending it out into the community.

If you haven't attended yet, 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 an interesting topic in a warm, non-judgmental setting. Since we began in July, we've dealt with issues like "Toxic Faith: When Religion Hurts," "Betrayed: Healing after a Broken Trust,"

today Megan will be hosting a discussion on “Secrets of Finding Contentment,” and one of our topics coming up next month is entitled “Only One Way to God?”

But rather than me trying to describe for you the impact of Lifetree Café, I’ve asked a couple of our hosts to share with you from their experience facilitating Lifetree episodes right here on Sunday mornings.

(Cindy and Paul come up and share 2-3 minutes each)

Each week the topic is different, but the feel is similar. Lifetree’s motto describes that feel: “You are welcome here. Your thoughts are welcome here. Your doubts are welcome here. We’re all in this together. And God is here; ready to connect with you in a fresh way.” There is a compelling story told with a DVD. There is 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.

Our first step has been to offer Lifetree Café here on campus on Sunday mornings, and that will continue. We also believe that Lifetree creates such an amazing opportunity to shine the light of Christ that we want to offer a second Lifetree at the Nightlife Center on Tuesday evenings. In the future we hope to offer a third Lifetree in a downtown location at midday.

So this is an invitation for you to participate in an adventure of shining the light of Christ in a new way – right here in our community. If our greeters would please hand out the interest cards for Lifetree, I encourage you to think and pray about how you might personally be involved in shining the light of Christ through Lifetree Café. We need a bunch of us who commit to showing up and inviting others to come with us. We need several of us to serve on the Friendship Team and tend to hospitality issues. And we need a few folks to serve as hosts and facilitate the conversation from the front, like Cindy and Paul and Megan have done. Please take a few seconds to fill out the card this morning and drop it in one of the watering cans in back.

Jesus says to you: “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.” Friends, being a part of what God is doing with Lifetree Café right here in our community is one good way to let the light of Christ shine through you. Let it shine.