

"It's What We Do With What You Have That's Important!"

Matthew 5:14-16
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1 Corinthians 4:1-5
St. James UCC

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"You are like light for the whole world." That was a fascinating metaphor that Jesus used, one which we often skip over today, because it takes some thought to decipher what it might mean for us to be light to the world.

Light. We would hate to live without it. Think about how gloomy and grumpy people get when it feels like the sun hasn't been shining for days. We don't like it and we can't wait for the sun to come back out. When it's light and bright our world just seems like a better place.

Light. There is so much that we do easier and better in the light. Think about all of the things that we do that it's tough to do in the dark. Without light it's awfully tough to read or write. We can build things by feel, but it's much, much harder. Many tasks are not only harder but much more dangerous in the dark. Light gives us the opportunity to use our talents and abilities to the fullest.

When Jesus said to the disciples: "You are like light for the whole world" He was charging them to bring something special into the world which makes it a better place, something which guides people to help them use the gifts God has given them to the fullest. Jesus was calling His followers to people of faith, people whose faith is so strong that it brings the light of that faith to the world around them.

That's the same kind of message that the Apostle Paul is bringing in our text from Corinthians. There he says: "You should think of us as Christ's servants, who have been put in charge of God's secret truths." That's a radical statement when you think about it! "You should think of us as" - in other words, when we identify ourselves or when others identify us, we are identified as servants of Christ and as people who have been put in charge of God's secret truths. That is our identity for the world. That is first and foremost who we are - or at least, who Paul says that we ought to be. In our text Paul then takes this one step further by reminding the Corinthian people that it is on this basis that they shall be judged by God. Have they been faithful servants of Christ, faithful stewards of God's secret truths? When their lives are summed up, when the good and the bad are weighed in the balance of God's judgement scales, how faithful or unfaithful we have been is what will determine our fate.

How will we fare? Well, Paul's suggestion to the Corinthians is that they have spent far too much time trying to judge one another, and that what they ought to do is to spend more time looking at their own lives, and deciding how they can do a better job at being faithful and living faithfully. That is the task for us as well.

Too often in life, that's not our goal, indeed our goal becomes something else, something far less important.

I remember one evening as I was driving in the car I was listening to a talk radio show in which the host was challenging his callers with the statement that "money can buy happiness". His statement was in effect that money can make everything better in life, and so money is the most important thing we can have. In a very real way he was lifting up money as the god that he worships.

This talk show host is not alone in his worship of the almighty dollar. Far too many people in our society - and in other societies around the world - have been seduced into thinking that money is what really is important in life.

I remember when my father died, and then three years later my mother. They were fortunate. In each case death was not a surprise, it was not a sudden shock, but rather came as a welcome release, and a fitting end to a life well lived.

I find that death's like theirs often bring family members and close friends to do a lot of remembering and reflecting on the person's life and it's meaning. That certainly has been true for my family and for me personally. Their deaths became a time for reflecting not only on their lives but also on the meaning of life and what is important about it.

Friday I received a card from my youngest sister. She had been sorting through a box of things, and came across a copy of our parents wedding invitation - and sent me a copy. When I saw it, I choked up. It brought back many special memories. You know, over the years, when I find myself sifting through memories of my mother and my father, not once have I remembered them with a dollar bill in their hand. Not once has a memory been about money. Not once has what they had or didn't have financially seemed in any way important.

Rather, the things that I have remembered have to do with love and laughter, and with values that they taught - not just by their words but by their example. The memories have been about family and friends and sharing things - both good and bad, easy and difficult. They've been about living life in a way that expresses your caring for one another. As I think about my parents and what was important about their lives, what was most lasting about their lives, those are the kinds of things that I remember. It's not ties to possessions, but rather to love - love for God and for one another.

Actress Loretta Young said it this way: "My belief in God is the main thing." Religion gives us strength. It tells us how far we can and cannot go - something our children no longer seem to know about, which is why so many of them are unhappy. The trick to life, I can say now in my advanced age (76 years of age), is to stop trying to make it so important. Take the qualities you do have, build on them and pray to find out what God wants of you."

So much of the time people spend their lives chasing after things they don't have. Their focus is on getting the money that they don't have, or wishing they had the looks that someone else has. We look at a sports star and think, if only I could play football like... or if only I could hit home runs like ..."

God has given each of us some special gifts. They're not the same for any two of us. The gifts that each of us have received are different, each are special, each are unique.

We can go through life wasting our time and energy wishing we had the gifts that someone else received, or we can go through life trying to use the gifts that we have to the fullest.

It seems to me that if God really felt that hitting homeruns was the most important quality in life, then we would all be built with massive arms and shoulders, and life would be set up so that we all played baseball everyday.

It seems to me that if being wealthy was the most important thing in life, then God would have set up a way that we really could "take it with us when we die", and that what people would really remember about us would be a large number preceded by a dollar sign.

Those images seem strange because that's not at all how life is. Those images seem strange because instinctively we know that those aren't the things that life is really about.

Deep inside each of us, I think we know what is really important about life, we know it, but it's tough to really try and do it all of the time.

I think we often let ourselves get confused by the fact that God gives each of us different gifts in differing amounts. The key is not what we have, or we would all start at exactly the same place and see who could accumulate the most from there. Rather, the only thing that makes any sense at all to me is that the key to life is what we do with what we have.

That's what Paul is talking about when he says that at the final judgment God will look at our lives and we will receive from God the praise we deserve. That's what Jesus is talking about when he tells His followers that they are to be light for the world, not hiding their lights, but rather as Jesus says so well, "In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven."

Today and through all the days to come, let us commit ourselves to living and loving as God wants us to. Let us dedicate our lives to using our talents and abilities to the fullest - in God's service.

Amen.