

Let it Shine!
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 5:1-20

If you wanted to pull one part of Matthew out and hold it up as Jesus' mission statement, you'd be wise to begin here in chapter 5. This teaching helped Jesus to articulate his understanding of the broadness and richness of God's mercy. And so, he made clear that those who mourn, those who are dis-spirited, and who are low in society's social order will be seen and tended to by God. More than that, they will be a vital part of Jesus' mission in the world.

Jesus also affirmed that aligning oneself with God's purposes by being merciful, earnest, and by building peace is more important than participating in the manipulative, power-hungry, and violent structures of the empire.

And, Jesus warned his followers that persecution and conflict would likely come as a result of these stated priorities. He said that when you hold yourself up to God's standards instead of Rome's, you are bound to attract some unpleasant attention. When you show your neighbors that a different kind of life is possible, you're bound to threaten those most invested in the status quo.

Knowing that persecution will come, today Jesus tells his followers to stay on God's course, even when it is a struggle. Because these disciples have a role to play in this mission. They are the salt and the light, and there simply can't be new life without them.

While Jesus draws heavily from his Jewish tradition in all four Gospels, in Matthew, his connection to his ethnic and religious traditions are particularly pronounced. The two primary metaphors he uses for discipleship were common to Jewish understandings of the relationship between God and humanity.

In the book of Leviticus, salt, used both to add flavor to food and to preserve it, was required to be a part of the grain offerings people brought to temple. In the book of Numbers, the promises and sacrifices that people make to God are called a "covenant of salt." Furthermore, the oven, which would

have stood close by to a first century Palestinians home was called an "earth" as it was made of clay. Salt was used as a catalyst to make the fuel that was used inside the oven burn.

Salt, present in good food, tears, ocean water, and the earth, was part of everyday life. It was also vital to the well-being of humanity. We need salt in order to be healthy.

In Jesus' line of thought, the potential for discipleship was as deeply imbedded inside them as salt was infused in the seas that surrounded them. What that means for us today is that our discipleship should be so ingrained in our being and our actions that were we to deny it, we would become as unrecognizable as salt that doesn't taste salty anymore.

The light, too, was a common religious metaphor in Jesus' community. Yesterday, I led my mother-in-law's memorial service. One of the prayers made reference to Psalm 119, where God's word is described as a lamp unto one's feet and a light to one's path. I've needed that light this week.

But here, in his teaching Jesus does something a little different with the light metaphor. He shifts the location from outside of the person to inside of the person. In this passage, God's light is not external, leading the way for us to follow. Instead, God's light, our discipleship, has become embedded in our very being.

So, in accepting our part in Jesus' mission, we become the flame, the very light of God. The disciples can light up the very world. Jesus seems aware that his disciples will be tempted to hide their discipleship away, as though they are hiding a lamp under a heavy bushel basket. He tells them that they can't succumb to that fearful temptation because light is necessary for new growth in the world. They are God's light now. Through their faith and their service, they will help God's new life grow.

One of the great gifts the African American church tradition has given us is music that has offered the broader Christian community powerful examples of people upholding God's light in dangerous and death-dealing circumstances.

These songs often became sources of inspiration, musical pilot lights, for communities that needed to be sustained as they fought for their very lives under systems that denied their humanity and their belovedness by God.

This music helped to connect them to one another and give voice to concerns specific to their lives as African-Americans. In a nation that sought to deny them a basic human identity, sacred music helped African-Americans take back some space in which to begin building new life.

One song we've sung many times is "This Little Light of Mine," which became a particularly important song for the Civil Rights Movement. This song became at once a call to commitment to the fight for equality, and also a source of comfort in dangerous times.

When Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the most powerful leaders of the movement in Mississippi, needed a song to demonstrate her commitment to equality and call all Americans to the cause, she chose "This Little Light of Mine." She sang it boldly at the 1964 Democratic National Convention when she challenged the white Mississippi Democrats who chose to send an all-white delegation.

During the community organizing meetings Dr. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders held, sheriffs would often show up to intimidate black citizens. They would take pictures and write down names. The people attending the meetings knew that the sheriff could share that information with their employers, costing them their livelihoods, or, worse yet, share it with people who would threaten their lives. One of the ways that the citizens would take the space back would be to sing. "This Little Light of Mine", a common and simple song with a deep meaning, was often one of those songs.

Harkening back to this verse in Matthew, reminding them of their calling to be God's light in this world, the song would bring them together and help them remain brave. Across the Jim Crow South, in protest marches and crowded jail cells, people would sing "This Little Light of Mine" and they would continue to shine God's light of love and justice in the world.

Now, this song was not written by a black person. It was written by a white man named Harry Dixon Loes. And, it is was never, and still isn't, only sung in predominantly black churches. But there's a good reason this song became so important to African-American churches, particularly during that time.

There's power in "I" songs. It mattered to the people who gathered in solidarity to sing a song where they stated their individual commitment to the cause for which they sang. Within African-American communities, when they sang out the words, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!," it became a declaration of intent and commitment. I am going to let this light shine. I am going to offer my energy, my well-being, and maybe my life to this movement. I am not going to hide my light in order to get by under the status quo. I am God's light. I am called to shine in the world. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.

My mother-in-law Rita was known as the "singing nurse". Whether she was dispensing meds, transporting or helping bathe the elderly patients at the nursing home where she worked for 25 years, Rita did it with a song. I asked her once what songs the patients loved the most, and she rattled off some titles by the Everly Brothers and Patsy Cline. But the one song she would get them to sing with her was always "This Little Light of Mine".

Know that when we sing, "I'm going to let it shine," it can mean that we are letting our own life be recommitted to Christ's mission of love and compassion. And right now is a time when we especially need people committed to being God's light.

We need people ready to preserve and heighten the divine flavor of creation. We need salt and light, and fortunately, Scripture reminds us that we can be the salt and light.

So, sing today to remind yourself of your commitment to loving God and loving your neighbor. Sing today to remind yourself of your saltiness. Sing today to remind yourself of your light. And, keep letting that light shine. Amen.