

“Where Did You Put That Lamp?”

Matthew 5.14-15

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So I've got this new lamp, and I'm trying to figure out what to do with it. It's got this little door that opens, with a tea light inside. Where should I put it? Look, there's a stand right down there. We'll put the lamp there. Now, how do I light it? Ah, there are some candles up there; and here's a candle I can use to get the light from there to here. Okay, here goes. Light up the candle, take the candle to the tea light, light the tea light, blow out the candle, close the door – great! Look – my lamp is shining!

Hmm. I don't know if I want other people to see this, though. I mean, what if they don't like it? What if they think it's ugly? What if they think I'm trying to call attention to myself? I mean, the whole point of this lamp is to give *me* light, so why do I even want it in a place where other people can see it? I'm feeling pretty self-conscious about this. I really don't want other people to see it. I don't want to blow it out, but I'd feel more comfortable if it were someplace where only *I* can see it. Maybe I should just try to hide it, and then I can peek at it whenever I wish. Oh, look – there's a basket. Great. Maybe I can just take the basket and cover it up – *perfect!* That's excellent! Solves the problem perfectly!

So what do *you* do, with *your* light? Jesus tells his followers – both *then* and *now* – to let their lights shine, rather than hide it under a metaphorical basket. My illustration may have been cute, but this is a *serious* issue. There is a perception here, in this congregation and others like it, that *our faith is a private, personal relationship with God*. Yet Jesus says quite clearly, “Let your light shine before other people.” Our faith is (and should be) a *personal* relationship with God – but Jesus says *unequivocally* that it is *not* supposed to be *private*. There is a difference between *personal* and *private*. *Personal* means *it's yours*. It's *your* faith, it's the faith that God has given to you, the seed that has been planted and watered and that God has caused to grow. Of *course* your faith is personal. It grows out of your own personal experience – with teachers and mentors in the faith, with the scriptures, with the church, with God – and those experiences are different for each of us. Faith *should* be personal; it should never be just some kind of abstract set of concepts that have nothing to do with the rest of your life. But faith is not supposed to be *private*. It's not something we should *hide* from the world. No, if there's a light shining in your heart because of who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has done for you, you shouldn't make it so you're the *only* one who benefits from it. “Let your light shine before people.” Jesus could not be more explicit: *your personal faith is something that the rest of the world needs to see*.

You may know that wonderful camp song – “This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it

shine, let it shine, let it shine. Hide it under a bushel, NO! I'm gonna let it shine. Don't let Satan blow it out! I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine." Many of us sang that song when we were kids, but somewhere between childhood and adulthood we stopped letting our light shine; we let Satan blow it out. "Don't talk about religion or politics" – how many of us live by that motto? "Don't say anything that would offend somebody" – how many of us live by that premise? There's a *cultural sensitivity*, a form of "political correctness," that says that we can all have whatever faith we want to have, so long as we don't talk about it too much. "Freedom of religion," right? You've got your faith, and I've got mine. Somewhere along the way, we start listening more to the culture around us than to Jesus; we start allowing the culture to neuter the gospel; eventually it reaches a point where ideas that don't come from Jesus seep into the very culture of the church. "We're Presbyterians. Our faith is private and personal. We don't talk about it with other people." We allow a warped notion that has *no* basis in the scriptures infiltrate the church; we start thinking it's gospel truth; we look at passages like this one and we say, "We're Presbyterians. We don't do that." Let us never forget that we are Christians first and Presbyterians second, and if we ever reach a point where we use the word "Presbyterian" as an excuse not to do something that Jesus is clearly telling *all* of his followers to do, then we deserve to be called *neither* "Presbyterian" nor "Christian." Jesus says "Let your light shine before others," and *his* voice ought to matter more to us than *any* cultural norm.

So what does it look like to let our light shine before others? I have the *beginning* of some thoughts. I'm not an expert here. This is relatively new territory for me too. I talk about matters of faith *here* in the *church* all the time – but I'm a bit less comfortable outside the contours of my job.

First, let's consider this: Do your friends know you're a Christian? Do your colleagues and co-workers know? Would people who show up at your house be able to tell that you're a Christian? I'm *not* saying, *do your friends and colleagues and co-workers and house visitors know that you go to church.* Unfortunately, it's entirely possible to go to church without being committed to Jesus Christ. I'm asking: do people in your world truly know that you have a Lord and a Savior whom you worship and serve? If that's *not* evident to people, then this is where we need to start. "Let your light shine before others." *People need to know that you're a Christian.* How can you let people know? Some people wear Christian jewelry. I know some guys who have a cross tattooed on their chest. There are *visible symbols* you can adorn yourself with, if you want. I've got a race jersey that Kathy helped me design last year; I wore it at the Mason 5K Friday night; it's got the words "HEART SOUL MIND STRENGTH" from Mark 12:30 on the front and "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" from Ephesians 6:10 on the back. It took me a while to work up the guts to decide that I wanted to wear something like when I'm racing, but I was inspired by similar jerseys I saw other people wearing, and I eventually concluded that this was something I *needed* to do – my own attempt to let my light shine in contexts where it wouldn't be at *all* obvious that I'm a Christian, let alone a pastor. I'm not saying you have to wear something, but we all need *some way* of letting our light shine before others. Just make sure that if you choose to wear a Christian symbol, the way you live your life is as magnificent a testimony to Jesus Christ as you can possibly make it. It does Christianity *no good* when people who wear Christian symbols are not embodying Christian values. None of us gets it right *all* the time – one of you recently called me out on something I said in a public forum that I should have worded more carefully – but it matters that we *try*.

A second dimension to consider: does your faith in Jesus Christ come up in the *conversations* you have with other people? You may think that everyone you know is already a Christian, but consider all the places you *go* where that might not be true. There's an employee I see with some frequency at Meijer. That's the only place I see this guy, is at Meijer. I need to be careful not to give away too much identifying information, 'cause I don't want to get him in trouble, but he and I have been having some conversations on and off for a while now. He grew up in the church, but he hasn't gone anywhere in a long time. He's *curious*, though. Once he figured out what I do for a living, he started asking me all sorts of questions. Slowly but surely, I hope I'm helping him grow in his understanding of what Christianity is all about. Each conversation builds on the one before it. I have to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work here – there's a *reason* why he's asking me all these questions. But if I hadn't been willing to have that *first* conversation with him, we wouldn't have had that *twelfth* conversation. There are *plenty* of people like that in our world, people who are *curious* and *hungry* for some spiritual meat, and they are literally *all around us*. They're at Meijer, they're in the movie theater, they're at the bank, the post office, the public library, the coffee shop, the gym, *your workplace*. Just about *everywhere* you go, there's probably *somebody* who's curious and hungry – and *looking for someone* who might be willing to engage in some conversation. That *someone* could be *you ... if you're willing to let your light shine*.

A buddy of mine who is a swim coach recently invited me to join a class he teaches, to help me with my technique. I had my first group lesson this past Tuesday night. There are a dozen people in the class, men and women of various ages, all strangers to me. We have some time to chat, before and after the class and between sets, and sooner or later, one of them will surely ask me, "What do you do?" I'm a little nervous about that; I *never* know what will happen next. *None* of us do, when we let our light shine. There are all sorts of prejudices and stereotypes out there, and in some circles Christians get a pretty bad rap. If we start talking about what we believe, some people might be offended. But you know, some people have been offended by Christianity for *two thousand years now*. Even *Jesus* offended people – a *lot* of people, actually – but that didn't stop him from proclaiming the message, and telling his followers to do the same. *We can't be afraid of or worried about what other people might think*. Sure, not everybody's going to be respond favorably to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's just a *given*. *Jesus told us it was going to be that way. But that should never stop us from being willing to let our light shine*. There's *somebody* out there who's curious and hungry and is *looking for somebody* to talk to. I'm willing to bet, there's at least *one* person in that swim class who's going to want to ask me some questions. I'm willing to bet, there's at least *one* person somewhere in *your* life who would love to ask *you* some questions about *your* faith. The more you let your light shine, the more likely it is that you might inspire somebody to go to church, the more likely it is that somebody might say, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?", the more likely it is that *you* will help *somebody else* grow in the faith.

Jesus tells us: *Don't do this*. Don't hide your light under a basket. Don't hide your *faith* under a basket. *Your light needs to shine*; your faith needs to be visible. Other people need to be able to see it. There's something that *each one of you can do* to make your light shine brighter than it's shining right now. I don't know what that is for you; you're going to have to figure that out for yourself. For me, it was a race jersey. What makes sense for you, for your context? Where could you start?

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