

Studies on the Sermon on the Mount

A LIGHT THAT SHINES

Matthew 5:14-16

There are three doors by which we may enter this guest house of Christ's truth.

One door we may call SYMBOLISM. To Christ, things were never just things: they were the sign-writing of God; ~~yes, almost God's sacrament,~~ "the outward and visible sign of his inward and invisible grace." Thus, ordinary things like salt (last Sunday night) and light become ~~still~~ likenesses of the eternal kingdom.

Another door we may call LOWLINESS. What is worth more than a lamp on the table? Yet, it has purpose. The disciple is lowly. He does not sell himself. But he is ready to burn out like a candlewick, for the sake of Christ. Perhaps the real threat to the world's health is not from big, booming forces, but from the failure of the seemingly small witness.

The third door might be called PRESENCE. Christian faith is no hermit, is set in the midst of the world. It is mixed with the world's life like salt, and shines on all its doings like light. Some people within the church admonish their pastor to "~~stick~~ to the gospel." I often wonder if ~~these~~ ^{these} people have ever read the gospel. The gospel speaks to all human affairs. Jesus repeatedly talked about trade, called wicked rulers by their right names, warned his nation of false ~~paths~~ ^{ways}, and died at last where all could see -- "outside a city wall." The faith is commended not by ~~an~~ a church living in its own motions, but by disciples who testify by what they say and do at Olive and Main Street; in short, by their presence in home and daily work.

IT IS LIGHT TO BEFRIEND BY. On what strange foundations we try to build the true society. Athletics? But there we have rivalry that easily becomes bad feeling. MUSIC? But the artist is rather notoriously given to a prima donna complex. EDUCATION? But a college is marked by jealousies, not ~~only~~ among the students, but among ~~the~~ faculty also. Enlightened self-interest? That is a contradiction in terms. Trade? Have not our wars been fought, in partial motive at least, for land, oil fields, and mines? What is the bond of a true society? Is it not the spirit of Christ? Man is that "strange creature who can view his own life." There is in him alone an eternal term by which he is able to say: "Time is swift." So men are joined in that deep ground of life, in the kingdom that came into history with the coming of Christ, in the grace of the Beatitudes.

But just as salt can lose its saltiness, light may be overcome by darkness or may cease to shine. Read these verses with care. There are widening circles of illumination: house," "a city set on a hill," "world." In each circle there are snuffers which extinguish the light, just because our human nature is the battleground for good and evil.] The house, or home, bring threats, through financial anxiety, or love taken for granted and therefore lost. The city brings threats, for their lurid excitements beckon, or we are persuaded that "business is business," or aimless crowds make us wonder if any life is precious. I have heard of a city morgue where five corpses were unclaimed because nobody knew them or nobody cared. The WORLD levels threats, as military personnel will know; in a strange land or a strange culture home seems far away, and the loyalties that we keep at home are easily relaxed.

You have heard the story of a blind man carrying a light? He explained it this way: "So people will not stumble over me at night." The phrase brings judgment and remorse, for people do stumble over us when our light

goes out. But the better reason for the lamp, even for the blind man, is that other people shall see their way. The disciple does not shine in his own light or for his own sake. Sometimes a church brags about itself, calling attention to its building, but such a claim is a dark inversion. The disciple is a bright presence in the world for men's sake, lest the world become dark, and for God's glory. The word "glory" does not mean that God is proud, or that he makes his men puppet-lightbearers, for God's glory is the love that died on a cross. Only God by his renewing spirit can tend our little lamp of life. Only he can trim the hard wick. Only he can provide the oil for the lamp. So the wise ^{alternate} movement of the disciples's life is that shown in the Mount of Transfiguration: from the mountain of prayer to the valley of need.

Have we interpreted these ^{ways} ~~words~~ from the sermon? Only from afar, not laying hands on them, but only hailing them from a distance. As we leave them, trusting God's spirit to illumine them more and more, we look again at their urgency and wonder: "light of the world." The earth will go stale without this witness; the world will walk in darkness without this light. What we do and say day by day is no casual affair. It is at once lowliness and hidden splendor of the spirit. Thus the prayer: "Lord, save me and bless me, that I may be a blessing."
