

Mirror, Mirror

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, June 27, 2010, Matthew 5:13-20

I just happened to be up and about this past Monday when the sun rose at 5:40 am. I try not to make a habit of getting up that early, but I was on my way back from dropping off my daughter Emily and her friend Jamie at the airport for an early flight. I guess if I had to be up that early, it was nice to be up on that particular day, because it was one of the earliest sunrises all year long. Monday, actually, was the longest day, with the sun not setting until 8:36 pm, meaning the daylight lasted almost 15 hours.

This time of year, you could almost live without electric light. Just do what you do while the natural light shines, then go to bed and get a good night's rest. That's how it used to be, of course. Then along came candles and lanterns, and ultimately the electric light bulb, and come December 21st, when there will be less than 9 and a half hours of daylight we will be grateful for them.

Speaking of the light bulb, I learned this past week that the real story behind its invention is more complicated than the story we usually learn in school. You know the traditional version of the story – the light bulb was invented by the great inventor Thomas Edison. It turns out that is, at best, an exaggeration. Let me explain.

Several scientists were actually working to create the first light bulb when in 1860, an Englishman named Joseph William Swan succeeded and got the first patent. The problem was that Swan's bulbs didn't shine very brightly and they didn't last very long. By 1878, Swan's best bulb would last only 13 hours. That made them impractical for most uses.

The next year Edison did come up with a similar bulb that lasted 15 hours, but it was still not enough. Determined to improve the light bulb to the point where it could become commercially successful, Edison actually bought Swan's patent and set to work. He experimented with different filaments, and incorporated the critical concept developed by three other inventors, Sprengel, Woodward and Evans. Sprengel, Woodward and Evans had figured out how to create a vacuum within a glass bulb, but being virtually unknown, they couldn't get financial backing. That was no problem for the famous Mr. Edison. Edison, borrowing from Swan, Sprengel, Woodward and Evans, was finally able to put together a bulb that would last for over 1200 hours.

So to say Edison invented the light bulb is a little like saying Bill Gates invented the computer. It isn't true, but Edison did more than just about anyone to make light bulbs and electric lights practical and get them to be used almost everywhere all around the world. Today, we take it for granted that we can have light at night whenever and wherever we want it, and Thomas Edison is responsible for that.

Jesus spoke of light and darkness long before Edison came along, of course. Jesus lived and taught in a time when candles or simple oil lamps were the best defense most people had against overwhelming darkness. If you have ever been out in the wilderness on a cloudy night, you know how dark it was in ministry here on earth.

In ancient times, most people feared darkness, and for good reason. When you can't flip on a light at a moment's notice, you can have a hard time getting around safely. And without doctors and emergency rooms available, a broken bone or a big cut from stumbling over something in the dark could be fatal. On top of these dangers, there were then as there are now,

bandits and burglars who took advantage of darkness. If you were out alone after dark, you were a sitting duck. You might be jumped by bandits laying in wait. Everyone who could tried to stay in during the dark hours, safe behind closed and barred doors.

So light was a great blessing, a precious gift, a source of safety and security and protection. And, as such, it made a wonderful image for Jesus to use in his teaching. And he used it in more than one way. The author of the Gospel of John was especially taken with the metaphors of light and darkness, and it is in that gospel that Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world.”

But in Matthew’s gospel, we hear Jesus use the same image in a different way. There, we read this morning, that Jesus spoke to his followers and said, “*You* are the light of the world . . . let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” So which is it? Is Jesus the light of the world or are we the light of the world? Can it possibly be that we are *both* the light of the world?

In fact, I think that is the right answer – both we *and* Jesus are the light of the world. And here is a way to think about it. There is light, and then there is LIGHT. Novelist Edith Wharton put it this way: “There are two ways of spreading light, to be *the candle or the mirror* that reflects it.” Jesus is the candle, the True Light, the Source of Light. We are mirrors who, if properly oriented, capture light from the source and shine it into the world’s darkness.

Mirrors are actually very ancient. Some of the earliest objects used as mirrors were probably polished stones from over 8,000 years ago. 6,000 years ago, polished metal mirrors were invented and widely used in the Middle East and China. Eventually, the glass mirror became the preferred type, and as glass making improved, mirrors came into widespread and common use.

As I said a moment ago, mirrors can be used to capture light and to send it in a different direction. That is the basic idea behind the use of mirrors in such things as microscopes and telescopes. Indeed, the world’s largest man-made mirror is part of a telescope. The mirror in the Large Binocular Telescope on Mount Graham is 27.5 feet across. It weighs about 40,000 pounds, is made of glass almost 2 inches thick and costs about \$4 million. That is a huge mirror, but it is tiny – even miniscule – compared to the sun, the source of the light it reflects. In the same way, the light we are able to reflect is tiny in comparison to the Light that Jesus is.

Nonetheless, we are called to be the light of the world, to reflect as much light as we are able into the very darkest places in the world. And how we do that? By the manner of our living. As we heard, Jesus said, “let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” I think it is important to note that this verse talks about good works – about doing things. People don’t hear “light,” they see “light.” Sometimes we need to be reminded that it takes more than words to spread the good news of God’s love. It takes action. We shine light not by what we say, but by what we do. We don’t just tell – we show.

Brethren in particular have always been drawn more to showing than telling. For the first two hundred years, Brethren did not pick their preachers simply because they gave a good sermon. Brethren called out people from the congregation – people they had known a long time, people they had gone to school with, people they had done business with, people they had observed in all kinds of settings other than worship. And they chose people whose lives reflected the light of Jesus Christ by the manner of their living. The congregation could then believe in that person’s preaching because they had already seen how that person lived.

Preachers had to show by their lives that they trusted Jesus and followed his teachings before they could get up and talk about it. They had to let their light shine before they were called to preach.

But letting our light shine by the manner of our living isn't just for preachers. We are all called to shine light into the darkness of the world by our deeds of compassion, kindness, generosity, gentleness and mercy. We may have electric lights today, but there are other ways in which the world is just about as dark as it has ever been, and in need of light – light that the followers of Jesus can capture from its Source, and then send into the places where it is needed.

Physical light is powerful and beautiful. Think of the light of a candle at a dinner table for two. Think of a campfire, with young people singing and roasting marshmallows. Think of a flashlight when the electricity goes out. A street lamp on a foggy evening; the sun coming through stained — glass windows; a Christmas tree; the sky just before the sun sets; a reading lamp beside a cozy chair; a night light in your child's bedroom; the bright sun on a sandy beach; the headlights on your car; the reflected light of a full moon on a clear night; the glow of starlight; the lights that outline the runway at the airport; the spotlights at the theater. Spiritual light, the kind we are called to capture and reflect, is even more powerful and beautiful. It is the love of God's people, expressed through acts of courage and compassion, which has lit up the world in countless ways.

Last year, Betsy St. Amant, a faithful Christian and stay-at-home mom wrote, “Well, this is my first Christmas as a stay-at-home mother, and my Christmas tree stays lit almost all day long. If we're home, which is most of the time, it's ablaze in all its green and golden glory. That is, until last week, when the top strand of lights burned out.

For a week, I moped to my husband about it. He used to be an electrician; surely he could do something, right? ‘My tree is sad,’ I'd say. And it was. It just looked mellow, all bright and stuffed full of ornaments and memories from the years — except for the top.

He fiddled with it one night for a little while, and came to the conclusion that he'd have to go light by light through the entire string -- which could take hours -- or he could go to the store and buy a short strand to drape around the dead bulbs. I didn't like that idea, because then the lights wouldn't be spaced evenly on the top compared to the rest of the tree. Plus, it's hard to find short strings around here -- the extras I found in the closet were 127 ft! If we used that, we'd have to wrap the entire tree and, with the additional lights, well, it'd probably be visible from Mars. I don't know about you, but I prefer admiring my tree without the need for sunglasses.

I kept whining about my sad tree, but to no avail. Two days before Christmas, there it still stood, tall and straight lit and beautiful—except for the highest portion. And then a thought came into my mind. Are all my lights burning for Christ? Do others see in my actions the light that is supposed to be there?”

Those are good questions for us to ponder on this last Sunday of June, on one of the longest days of the year, just about as far away from Christmas as we can get. The days are long, but it still gets dark eventually. And the world still has so much darkness in it. Are all our lights shining? Are we reflecting the light we receive in as many ways as we can? Do the things we do, the choices we make, make the world a better, brighter place?

I hope so. After all, it is what Jesus has asked us to do – let our light shine.

Amen.