

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE!

(06/25/17)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:1-16

“ . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 5:16)

On my way to Worcester a few weeks ago, I found myself bogged down in that spot where traffic invariably slows between West Main Street and the Mass Pike, at least if I don't get there before 7:00 a.m. I noticed the car creeping along in front of me was sporting a bumper sticker. It said, “Christians are not better than other people; they are just forgiven.”

Since I was stuck behind someone who wears his theology on his sleeve, or rather on the back of his car, I had time to think about the bumper sticker. When I finally passed him, I glanced into the car. He seemed like a normal enough person. Then again, it's difficult to tell the people who have been forgiven from the people who have not been forgiven. In fact, at times it's difficult to tell the Christians from the non-Christians.

I would classify this bumper sticker as a theological bumper sticker. Actually, I prefer theological bumper stickers to dog-lover bumper stickers (like “I love my pit bull”) or political statement bumper stickers (like “Don't blame me, I didn't vote”) or social issue bumper stickers (like “Honk if you hate noise pollution”). I assume the car owners are extraverts who like to tell people, even people they don't know, what they think--and who assume that these other people, people like me, really care.

In the history of the Christian church there have been many different schools of theology. Theology is the study (*logos*) of God (*theo*). It is an attempt to understand not only God but also our relationship with God. This man's bumper sticker is expressive of one such school.

One of the mainline schools of theology from the early centuries on is the “sin and atonement” theology. This theology focuses on our sin and our need to be forgiven if we are to be saved, if we are to go to heaven after we die.

As you know, I am interested in people's concept of God, the image they have of God that makes their conceptual or operational theology meaningful. I find that people who hold a sin and atonement theology usually picture a stern, judgmental God, a perfectionist who looks down with an omniscient eye, who records every sin of thought, word, or deed, and who will condemn us to everlasting hell if we do not confess our sins and sincerely repent.

This focus on sin is accompanied by atonement, which is basically a belief in inevitable punishment. When something goes wrong in this world, someone has to pay. This theology holds that God needs to wipe away the sin of Adam and Eve, the sin of becoming conscious, the sin that we inherit by virtue of being human as well as our own sins. In order to achieve this end, God sends his son to be killed in place of us. Because Jesus died on the cross, our sins are forgiven. He suffered and died in place of us. As you can see, this theology is built on the assumption that someone has to suffer and pay for the sin of Adam and Eve and also for our own sins. I have always thought of the theology of the atonement as a “better him than me” theology.

There is a catch, however. According to this understanding, although Christ died as a substitute for us, we have to believe this to be saved. If we do not believe we are forgiven, the forgiveness is retracted and we go to hell. According to this theology, whereas all people are forgiven, only Christians who realize it are *really* forgiven. This, in a nutshell, is the theology of the man with the bumper sticker. He is one of the select group that have been *really* forgiven.

This bumper sticker helps explain the results of a research project conducted by Milton Rokeach, a psychologist of religion back in the 1970’s. Rokeach wanted to see if people’s religion made a difference in the way they lived their lives, so he studied the population of some city in the Bible belt. He took a random sample, asked them whether they were Christian or not, and then asked them how often they had violated their ethical principles in the past week.

Rokeach found that those who claimed to be Christian violated their ethical principles just as frequently as those who claimed to be atheists or agnostics. He then checked the criminal records of the city to see if, percentage wise, there had been fewer Christians arrested than non-Christians. He found that there was no significant difference in the number of Christians and non-Christians in jail. Rokeach could have saved himself a lot of trouble if he had just read that bumper sticker. According to the bumper sticker, Christians are not more moral than non-Christians; they are just forgiven.

This sin and atonement understanding of salvation is not the only theological viewpoint that has been espoused in the history of the Christian church. An alternative doctrine is what is called creationist theology. Whereas the atonement theology views this world as fallen and sinful, creationist theology holds that God not only created the world, God “saw that it was very good.” Whereas atonement theology holds that God is all good and human beings are all evil, creationist theology holds that human beings, as children of God, are essentially good. Whereas

atonement theology focuses on sin and our alienation from God, creationist theology focuses on God's creation of the universe, God's creation of us, and our role as co-creators with God.

Creationist theology focuses on our relationship with God. It tells us that God has created us in love and continues to create us. As we deepen our relationship with God, we open ourselves to God's creative, healing, guiding presence. This is what transforms our lives. The church is one of the tools that God uses to transform us. But it works both ways. Through the church, God continues to create us, and through us, God continues to create the church. Then through us and through the church God continues to create the world.

Let's go back to the bumper sticker. I couldn't tell by looking in the car window what kind of a life this man was living. For all I know he might be a terrorist or a hit man for the Mafia (though his car wasn't expensive enough to place him in the latter category). By his own admission, being a Christian doesn't mean he is living a better life than non-Christians. It only means that because he believes in Jesus Christ, he is forgiven.

Milton Rokeach's study and the man's bumper sticker challenge us to think about whether our faith makes a difference in the way we live our life. Shouldn't it make a difference? Shouldn't we be able to tell the Christians from the non-Christians?

Do people who know you know you are a Christian? Can they see it from the way you handle the crises of your life? Can they see it from the way you live and the way you relate to others? Can they tell from what you do with your resources, with your talents? Do you let your light shine in such a way that everyone who knows you will take the quality of your life as a testimony to your faith and to the God who is the ground of your being?

Christians whose faith is not apparent or distinguishable in any way have a credibility gap when they attempt to "preach the gospel" to a world that is in desperate need of it.

The atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said that if he saw more redeemed people he might be more inclined to believe in their Redeemer. If I tell you that I have an excellent financial advisor but I am filing for bankruptcy, you would probably not be inclined to entrust your finances to him/her. It doesn't do any good to tell people how much our Savior means to us if they are unable to see any evidence of peace, joy, love, or compassion in the way we live our life.

The best way to witness to our God, to our faith, is to let our light shine. In his letter to the early church, James said that faith without works is dead. Actually, it is impossible to have

faith without works. There is no way that we can have a deep and meaningful faith that does not bear fruit in good works.

The light of God shone through Jesus: “the light that shines in the darkness.” Jesus was radiant with God’s light because he was transparent to God. It shone through his love, his compassion, and his desire to lead people from darkness to light, from death to immortality.

I have to give him credit: the man with the bumper sticker was witnessing to his faith. But there are other ways to witness to our faith. Jesus tells us we have a light deep within us—the light of God. We need to be stewards of this light. We should not hide it under a bushel; we should place it on a lamp stand so it can give light to those around us. When we witness to our faith in such a way that people can see it is important to us, they may become curious about what it is that helps us go through life the way we do. We witness to our faith through what we create—in our own lives, in our church, and in the world.

This is our challenge as Christians—to let our light shine. This is how we witness to Christ as individuals and as a church. We need to share ourselves—our time, our talent, and our treasure. We need to become co-creators with God—of ourselves, of our church, and of the world. We need to be faithful stewards of the talents that have been entrusted to us.

Remember the song we used to sing in Sunday school: “This Little Light Of Mine”? What if this is what it’s all about? What if the whole thing is not as complex as we make it—ok, as *I* make it? What if it is really as simple as letting that little light shine? What if it involves nothing more than what we do every Christmas Eve: receive the light, nurture the light, and share the light?

If we follow Jesus, we will let God’s light shine forth in our lives so brilliantly and beautifully that people will see our good works and give glory to that God who is the creating and guiding center of our life.

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June 25, 2017*