

First Lesson: Isaiah 58:1-9a  
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12  
The Gospel: Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday of Epiphany  
February 9, 2020

“Let Your Light So Shine”  
Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell D. Nelson  
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

We have been speaking over these past 5 weeks of vision work, of setting a God ordained vision for this congregation, through now until 2025, our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The challenge of setting a vision is to make sure it is God’s vision, not our own. Most vision work for humans comes by studying trends and seeing how trends are moving forward. After this past week I saw some trends that were disturbing to me. Do you remember seeing pictures of houses of Congress in other countries where people would come in fisticuffs? Do you remember that in Korea? If I see trends from the State of the Union address, it won’t be long before there will be fisticuffs because you could see the absolute detestable nature, both sides looking at each other.

The Super Bowl was just last week, during half time I went out and picked some oranges. That sounds awfully sweet, doesn’t it? The birds were getting the better of me, so I wanted to get some oranges during that time. I came back in about two-thirds of the way through, I took a look at the screen, and I went “uffda”. I’m not sure if that’s the best way to use Norwegian, but that’s what got out of me. Did anybody see that half-time show? Well, if you trend that out, boy, a couple years from now it is going to be “get kids out of town”. I tease my wife Debbie, I said “I am a good enough pastor, if I need to watch that whole half-time show, I will do it to show my commitment to preaching.” I didn’t see it. You look at trends of the world and trends of society, you can see how things are drifting, would that be fair to say?

This week one of our members made sure that I had this material, this is from Dwight Zscheile, he is the Vice President of Operations at Luther Seminary. I am actually working to bring him down here, I think this will be interesting. He is one who put together a trend analysis, in 2017 there were 3,458,000 baptized members in the

ELCA. If we continue to trend, by 2050 there will be 66,000. Isn't that stunning? Right now, about 899,000 are in worship. By 2041, according to one of the data points, 15,000. You know what the issue is, you know the young people are not coming in, and we the older will pass. He said something and I thought it would be interesting as we look at our vision. He said it this way, "We live in a culture that makes it hard for people to imagine and be led by God." I think that's a true trend. He also said, "God isn't necessary to lead a good life." I was thinking about that.

I have shared with you that my two parental mandates from my Daddy is, *let them know what you think son*; and my Mom's is *oh please be nice*. That's the kind of Swedish pietism that builds a man up. The First Lesson speaks a little bit about this superficial nature of religion. It says it in this way, *why do we fast, but speaking to God, but you do not see. Why do we humble ourselves, but you don't take notice*. It's like doing church for the sake of our relationship with God, not for the sake of what comes further. No, this is the path that I choose, to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free. That is a really powerful statement, to break every yoke, and how do we do that? By sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into the house. When you see the naked, to cover them. I thought about sending J Lo a message on that one, but ... Sorry. This last line, not to hide yourself from your kin, which a roundabout way of saying this – don't pretend that you don't see it. That's what that means, kind of just driving by mentality we have. Because when you share the love of God, when you reflect the love of God, when you radiate the love of God, then these things happen – light shall break forth like the dawn, your healing shall spring up quickly, your God shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be behind to protect you.

It is hard to understand how we get out of this trend and we move into the proclamation of God's new life. It says in the Second Lesson, *what no eye has seen, no ear heard, in the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him*. It's not going to be a trend, it's going to be an in breaking of God's love. That is exciting, that is spiritual work, that's holy work, so how do we do that? The Matthew text speaks about this. It starts that we are salt, we are salt of the earth. This is a powerful word, the word *salary* which you remember from your working years, is really the root, salt, people were paid with salt, it was that valuable. We think of gold now, but in those days, salt – salary, it implies a covenant relationship, that we have a relationship certainly with compensation, but for you and I, salt means for us that we are people of God, we are God's people. That's our commitment. We

are committed to God. We, on the second metaphor, being the light of the world, we are committed to people. That is what we are about.

So this phrase, *Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.* It is so important, that line, so that people see it is not about us, but we give thanks to God and they see this movement forward.

One thing, just to make sure you don't feel nervous about it, that last part of the Gospel text talks about *unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.* Our righteousness does exceed individual performance because of God's righteousness through Jesus Christ. Never ever forget the linkage that we have, not our righteousness, God's righteousness. It set Martin Luther free and it sets us free. Let your light shine.

I was thinking of bringing a bushel basket and putting it on my head, but I know some of you have smart phones and I don't want that our there, there are enough problems I've got already. You can imagine this idea, don't cover up. Over the years, letting your light shine, let your light radiate, let your life be transparent. I'm old enough that transparency used to be a bad thing, it meant there was no *you* there, everything just kind of flowed through you, but now it is a positive word. It's a word that describes there are no secrets, no surprises. As I take a look at our congregation and our work to do, vision work, dream work, your dreams, my dreams for the future is holy work. It will be very touching to hear – if I asked you “what's your dream for your life or your family, or the life of the church, for our country, for our world.” Most of us are beaten down, we think the trends are too powerful, but the love of God is one that the new comes springing forth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I just learned, or relearned, the most marvelous speech by Martin Luther King Junior. *I have a dream.* It had two components, he was lecturing back in the early 60's of course, such pressure on him to give a good speech, so many fine people there also. As he was speaking and almost lecturing, a woman behind him who sang the Gospel, Mahalia Jackson. She said this, and it is just very light in the audio. As he is going through a powerful speech, she says this. *Tell them about the dream Martin, tell them about the dream.* Then he switched, he went off script, his speech writer noticed it and said, “Well, these people don't know it, but everybody is about ready to go to church.” This Baptist preacher laid out the dream. I think about that – how

did she know to say that, that he had taken the risk to share that dream with her? This dream work is holy and precious. If God has given you a dream, it is something to be thankful for. If our congregation developed dream work where we encourage one another to dream. If we can discern and we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, a mutual dream of God's glory, shining forth from this congregation, where people are encouraged to let their life shine forth, where families are reunited, where this church is just vitality here in the Northwest Valley, that people are alive. I pray that can be us.

The summary I have for us is as simple as this. Don't be afraid, let your life shine, let the love of God reflect off you, let the love of God radiate. Together we can make a difference. We have a covenant with God. We are the salt of the earth. We are people who can bring light. My last encouragement, during these days where the church is struggling to find its message. If you have ever been on a camp out before, and you have been in the dark, somebody comes in with the flashlight. Have you ever had that pleasant experience when you are sitting there and they shine it right in your eyes? That is what some people think the light of Christ is – they think we are trying to blind them. They think we are trying to interrogate them. Brothers and sisters, we are called forward to bring a light to their path, a way of moving forward together. We shine it as you do as hospitality on a camp out, you don't shine it in somebody's face, you shine it down at the bottom so we can see where we are at and walk together. That is what we are called to do, walking together. Sharing the love of Jesus Christ. Amen