

“You Are the Light of the World”

Matthew 5:13-16

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In my wallet, I have a library card, a driver’s license, a membership in AARP, my Social Security Number, and an ATM card. Together, these begin to identify me. I like to read. I drive a red truck. I am over 50. And I use cash. But they don’t come close to naming my spiritual identity. Jesus gives me my spiritual identity when he looks me in the eye and says, “YOU are the light of the world.” That is who I am. And that is who YOU are, too! You, you, you are the light of the world. In a way, to be confirmed is to claim this sacred identity.

We can all name famous people who have been a light in the world. We name Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks and Millard Fuller. But the real question is ‘how will I be a light in God’s world?’ Into what darkness will I bring a Christ light? Some of us will do this work as volunteers; some will do it as a vocation; some will do it as a calling. But sooner or later, Jesus looks each of us in the eye and says, “You are the light of the world. Let your light shine.”

On our recent mission trip to Malawi, we paid a visit to the Mkwero Secondary School. Through the Minister’s Discretionary Fund, South Church is supporting 32 students on that campus. We chatted with the head mistress, Esme Chamdimba, about various challenges the students are facing. Then, abruptly, she looked at Siobhan, Dana, and Kelsey, and said, “You will each be teaching a class on Monday. Which class will you teach?” They were all stunned by the proclamation! Us? Teach? What she was really doing was inviting our mission team members to be a light in the darkness of those classrooms.

Over the next two days, I watched our three young women sweat over lesson plans, worry about how they would come across, and be anxious about how they would be received. Monday came. The bell rang. Siobhan taught a Biology class on the repertory system. Dana taught a class on how to prevent the spread of HIV-AIDS. Kelsey taught a class on reading comprehension. When they emerged from their 45 minute lessons, they were all aglow! Each in her own way had let her light shine! I'm sure their lesson content was superior in every way. But it was their sheer willingness to take a personal risk that made all the difference. They claimed their identity as disciples. They were, in the heat of that day, a light. As for me, I just sat back and smiled a contented smile. I had had each of the three in Confirmation years earlier. Watching them step up to the plate to participate in the liberating work of education gave me that deep sense of satisfaction that makes life worth living!

One need not travel to Africa to be a light in the world. There is plenty of darkness in our own neighborhoods, in our own village, in our own schools, in our own backyards. The question is not so much WHERE will I be a light, but HOW will I use my unique gifts to be a light?

This year's Confirmation class is full of gifts. One has a gift for accepting her peers just as they are. One has a gift for sitting down at a piano and banging out a tune. One has a gift for putting a positive spin on even the most negative situation. One has learned that from great trauma there arises hope. One has a gift for speaking the truth in love. One has a gift for listening to another's heart. One has a gift for capturing beauty on film. Each one has a gift, a spiritual gift. A caring, vibrant congregation is one that notices these gifts, nurtures these gifts, and then invites these gifts to be shared as a light in God's world. I would say that this is what makes South Church such a special community.

We are not so hung up on using our own gifts that we fail to discern and draw upon the gifts of all ages, tongues, and races.

I really love this place. Just recently, several people opened their guitar cases and started jamming together, making music for alternative worship. Just recently, someone suggested offering the community a free and anonymous food distribution station, a food 'put and take' to chase hunger away. Just recently, about 30 of you carpoled to the Heifer Farm in Rutland, Massachusetts to be a light to those who struggle to survive in locations of poverty. Just recently, some of you joined the Salmon Brook worship team bringing joy to people for whom joy is in short supply. Just recently, some of you used your voices to promote affordable housing in our town. Just recently, some of you rode your bicycles to fund research for the healing of traumatic brain injuries. Just recently, you held members of our church in prayer and they were comforted by your faith. Just recently, you traveled to South Dakota where you trained military veterans to build ramps for disabled Native Americans. In myriad and countless ways, you are letting your Christ Light shine!

Matthew, the writer of today's Gospel text, was committed to building up the church by training men and women and children to be faithful disciples. For him, being a faithful disciple meant claiming our God-given gifts and then using those gifts to sow the seeds of love wherever hatred festers; to sow the seeds of acceptance wherever rejection lingers; to sow the seeds of compassion wherever loneliness persists; to sow the seeds of peace wherever violence reigns. In short, we are to be a Christ Light in the world.

As we celebrate today with 23 young women and men, confirming their faith, may we all reflect deeply on our sacred identity. Ready or not, we are blessed by Jesus with a holy identity. We are the light of the world! In claiming this identity, we remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.

