The Word in the Windows: Let Your Light Shine Before Others

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
January 25, 2026 – AM Sermon
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Matthew 5:13-16

Before I read this, Let's get our bearings. Where are we? We are on the mountain with Jesus. Jesus' words here are part of the famous Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is given by Jesus at the beginning of the book of Matthew. It runs from Matthew 5 to Matthew 7. The Sermon on the Mount is pictured in our windows. You see in the last set of windows on the west side of the church. The center window of that set shows Jesus on the mountain teaching the people. Our story is depicted at the bottom of that middle window. It's a candle being covered by a basket. That's the image you see on the cover of your bulletin.

The words I'm about to read are from the beginning of Jesus' sermon. Jesus starts the sermon with the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are the meek." Jesus blesses his congregation, and then he says this to them what is written in Matthew 5:13-16.

Good strong words. Jesus is using two images to encourage his congregation. "You are the salt of the earth!" Salt was more than a seasoning in those days; it was a preservative. Back then you didn't have refrigeration, so you salted your meat and that kept it edible. Salt kept meat from decay. To say 'you are the salt of the earth' meant that your presence in the world will keep it from decay. Your presence and activity will keep the world from going bad. "You are the light of the world!" That image is clearer to modern ears. Light has the power to destroy darkness. One little candle can push the darkness aside. Jesus is telling his congregation, 'You can push back the darkness!'

To whom is Jesus speaking these strong words? Who is sitting in front of Jesus when he preaches the sermon on the mount? Who's he looking at when he says, "You are the light of the world." Who are these people who will keep the world from decay and darkness? If you want to know who Jesus is talking to, go look at the end of Matthew 4, right before the sermon starts. Matthew 4:23-25 shows you Jesus' congregation. News about Jesus has spread all over the region and a large crowd has gathered. They are from far and wide: Galilee, Judea, Syria, the Decapolis. Here's Matthew's description of that crowd: "People brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed and he healed them." So that's the crowd. It's a gathering of the sick and desperate. People so sick and desperate they've travelled many miles to see Jesus.

If you want a modern version of this crowd, picture a group of pilgrims who go to Lourdes. Lourdes is a Roman Catholic shrine in France. The shrine dates back to the mid 1800's when a young girl reported a series of 18 visions of the Virgin Mary in a grotto – a cave. Ever since then that grotto and the spring there have been associated with miraculous healing. 5 million people a year visit this shrine, and the majority of them come to be healed. Every day there is a great parade of the sick and the blind and the lame. People with cancer, people in wheelchairs, people carried on stretchers, people struggling with depression and trauma and chronic pain. They come from all over the world looking for healing. As they pass through the grotto where the visions took place, it's customary for them to touch the walls of the grotto. Over the years, the rock has been worn smooth by all the desperate hands reaching out to find healing and wholeness.

Those are the people gathered around Jesus. It's a crowd of desperate people. They are not the Young Jewish Leaders of tomorrow. This is the furthest thing from an honors convocation. And yet Jesus looks out over them and he says, "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!" Can you see what a remarkable statement this is? You have to wonder, did they all look at each other and say, "Us?! the light of the world?! Jesus, surely you must be thinking of someone else."

I wonder if that's our reaction too. Because Jesus isn't just saying those words over the people on the hillside, he is saying them over you. "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!" I wonder, is that how you would describe yourself? Is that the feeling you have about yourself? Do you feel like you are radiant with faith, hope and love? When you walk out the front door in the morning, do you feel like a shining light? Do you feel equipped to deal with the fear and anger out there? Or do you feel tired and uncertain, and sometimes afraid. "Jesus, I hear your words, but if I'm honest, most days I don't feel like the light of the world; most days I'm just trying to make it through."

In one sense we look like a very different crowd than the crowd Jesus was looking at. No one walking into LaGrave and looking around would think of us as a bunch of desperate, hurting people. In fact, some might say that we are the opposite of that desperate crowd. And I get why people say that. There are a lot of successful people here. But that doesn't mean we're not desperate. I don't care how successful you are, what board you're serving on, what firm you're a partner at, what successful business you started, what learned paper you've published, you know what I'm talking about. From Jesus' perspective there's not much difference between us sitting here this morning and those crowds of desperate people reaching out to touch the rock at Lourdes. And yet Jesus says to all of us, you are the light of the world. How are we to understand that? How can we be light?

It's not our own capacities. It's not because we're so awesome. This week I heard a talk by Tim Keller in which he gave a couple of quotes by HG Wells. HG Wells was a well-known author in the early 20th century. He was best known as a science fiction writer and author of books like *The War of the Worlds*. Science Fiction is a kind of writing generally favored by those who believe in human capacity. Science fiction writers believe in the power of human progress. It's a literary form favored by those who believe that human knowledge can bring light to the world and bring a great age of peace and prosperity.

For most of his life, that's what Wells believed. Here's a quote: "Can we doubt that presently our race will more than realize our boldest imaginations, that it will achieve unity and peace, and that our children will live in a world made more splendid and lovely than any palace or garden that we know, going on from strength to strength in an ever-widening circle of achievement? What man has done, the little triumphs of his present state…form but the prelude to the things that man has yet to do." Wells looked at the brightest and strongest men of his age and said, we can change the world.

But later in his life he was singing a different tune. Listen to this quote from the end of his life. "The cold-blooded massacres of the defenseless, the return of deliberate and organized torture, mental torment, and fear to a world from which such things seem to be banished—has come near to breaking my spirit altogether… "Homo sapiens, as he has been pleased to call himself, is played out."

What happened? How did the man so sure of human capability end up writing something so hopeless? World War Two happened. The Holocaust happened. Wells saw the carnage of the war and the horror of the death camps and terror of the atomic bomb and his hope for humanity was incinerated. If it is rooted in human cleverness and human capacities, human hope is subject to the 2nd law of thermodynamics. Our hope will tend towards entropy. Our hope will decay into cynicism and despair.

But when Jesus calls these people the light of the world and the salt of the earth, is it based on their capacity? Is it based on their cleverness and industry? No. When Jesus calls them the light of the world it has nothing to do with them and everything to do with Jesus. If we are the light of the world, it is because Jesus set us on fire. We are the light of the world, not because we are so awesome, but because Jesus said so, because he put his Spirit in us. "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Here's a historical question for you: HG Wells looked at the brilliant statesmen and scientists and business titans of his age and said, 'You are the light of the world! Humanity will do great things through these great men!' On a Galilean hillside, Jesus Christ stood over a band of misfits, people whose lives were falling apart, and he said, 'You are the light of the world.' Who was right? Jesus was right!

Wells' optimism was destroyed by the death camps and the carnage of war. But Jesus will take this band of misfits on the hillside, and he uses them to build his church. By his grace, through his Spirit, he gathers them into community, he washes them with his blood, he puts his resurrection life in them. He doesn't make them suddenly powerful or perfect; their lives are still messy and uncertain. But Jesus is in them. They break bread together. They worship together. They encourage each other. They care for each other. They share their love with their neighbors. The empire around them lives by ruthlessness and power; they live by grace. And within 100 years this little band of misfits on that Galilean hillside has grown into a community of thousands spreading across Asia and Europe. The light of Christ shines in Athens and Rome and Damascus. Jesus' words prove completely true.

Since Jesus' hillside sermon, empires have come and gone, tyrants have blustered for a season and then faded into oblivion, wars have raged and brought death and destruction, but in the middle of it all Christ has gathered his people. Now there are 2 billion Christians all over the world.

Our community has been far from perfect. The church has done terrible things. There are many stories of the church being complicit in evil, complicit in greed, and complicit in injustice. Those are sins we should name and confess. But they are NOT the center of who we are. That's not the life of Jesus; those are our sins corrupting his light. And despite these sins, Jesus has kept his light burning in us. He has preserved a community of ordinary, broken people saved by grace. And whenever we let our Lord's life live in us, whenever we stay close to his word and close to his table, whenever we live the life described in this sermon – turning the other cheek, praying, loving our enemies, giving to the needy, forgiving each other – whenever we let his life fill us, the light shines and the darkness falls back.

So friends as you go out into this week, as you face your stuff, as you face the very real and very troubling conflicts on the streets of our city, I proclaim to you something that is stronger and more true than any of that stuff. You belong to Jesus, and you - yes you! - are the light of the world. So let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven. Go out there and do something holy, hopeful and kind. Let's do it as individuals, let's do it together in our neighborhood. Because we are the light of the world.

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