

An Outwardly Loving Community

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 8

Ephesians 5:1-21

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Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. **2** And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. **3** But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. **4** Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. **5** For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. **6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. **7** Therefore do not become partners with them; **8** for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light **9** (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), **10** and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. **11** Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. **12** For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. **13** But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, **14** for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” **15** Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, **16** making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. **17** Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **18** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, **19** addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, **20** giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **21** submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:1-21, ESV)

Today we conclude our fall series, *Together in Christ amid Divisive Times*. This series drew our attention to the Christian community—to the nature, habits, and loves of the local church. It set before us a single verse as our fall vision: “to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Our prayer was that especially amid a storm-tossed season in our world, our anchor in Christ would hold, that we would display to ourselves and the world the power and beauty of what it means to be united in Christ. Our final question, or area of concern, has to do with how the unity and quality of this community in Christ, impact the world around it: in this sermon, we consider that we are an *outwardly loving community*.

To see this theme in Ephesians, we need only to notice an image Paul uses for the Christian community. Paul employs an array of metaphors for the church in this letter: a body, a Temple, a household, a bride.

In our passage today, from Ephesians 5, he sets before us yet another: *light*. Ephesians 5:8, “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”

Paul does not say we are like light, or shine light, but what we *are* light. And by doing so, he picks up on an important theme that has been unfolding since the opening page of the Bible. Light, especially when it is compared to darkness, is a key way to understand what God is doing in the world, and what He calls His people to be. A few examples from Scripture will make the point:

Genesis 1:3; Light is the first thing God creates in Genesis 1, dispelling the primordial darkness with four words, “Let there be light...And God separated the light from the darkness.”

Isaiah 60:5; When God’s people have sunk into sin and been sent into exile, God speaks hope over them in Isaiah 60:5; His light will once again rest upon them, and they will in turn shine like a light in the world:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.... Then you shall see, and be radiant (Isaiah 60:1–3, 5).

What God is about, what God is doing in the world, can be likened to light dispelling darkness.

Many Christians today when asked about the light of the world, would understandably say it is Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world. But this isn’t quite right, or at least not quite precise enough. Jesus says in John 9:5, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” But Jesus is not in the world right now, not physically. But, His Spirit is here, and it fills the church. And Jesus teaches, therefore, that the light of the world right now emanates from His gathered people.

So, in our Gospel reading from Matthew 5, Jesus tells His first followers: “You are light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). This is the promise Paul picks up, when in our passage He says of the church, “at one time you were darkness, but now you are light” (Ephesians 5:8).

This image, therefore, of light shining into darkness both clarifies our Church’s mission, while also indicating an extraordinary responsibility.

The light metaphor is poignant because it depicts the far-reaching need that the world has for the church and its message. The sun is the most important physical light in our world. It is the source of all life on earth. Plants capture sunlight through photosynthesis and produce carbohydrates—sugar, starch, and fiber. Plants are eaten and the solar energy is passed through the food chain from the plant to animal to animal, from creature to creature. Without the energy of the sun, the earth would be a frozen rock with no life. All our weather comes from the energy of the sun, warming air, and the sea, causing wind and ocean currents which provide the turbulence to bring forth rain and the four seasons. The sun is the source of our physical existence. All life exists due to the radiance of the sun.

The stark image Paul gives us in our passage makes a similar but deeper point. There is darkness in the world, then there is the light that is the people of God. This light, which emanates from the people of God, is the presence of God among us; it is the message of the Gospel—the hope of the world. The Bible does not suggest alternative lights; this is it. Either you walk in the light emanating from Jesus’ community, or you are in darkness.

We need light. We know this. We feel the darkness around us and within us; we look to things to be light—leaders, nations, parties, people—but we know they cannot finally dispel the darkness. In our searching about in the dark, we too often mistake man-made light for the real light.

In 1630, as the ship *Arbella* neared the shores of the soon-to-be-founded Boston, John Winthrop gave a sermon that is now famous for its reference to Jesus’ words in our Gospel reading, where Jesus calls His people “the light of the world, a city on a hill.” Arriving as a group of Puritans, when you read the sermon you realize that Winthrop’s vision of the community to be fostered in the new world was nothing short of the community of God’s people. I want to highlight an excerpt, for he also quotes our vision passage for the fall, Ephesians 4:3, and speaks of a community that beautifully reflects the vision coming from scripture. I highlight this not because I believe any nation-state is today a manifestation of his dream, but because it reminds us that it is the church, not any nation, that is to be the light of the world, a city on a hill. Winthrop speaks to his friends:

“Now the only way to avoid [...] shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, *to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God*. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’

conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we *keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace* (Eph 4:3)... *For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill* (Matt 5:14). The eyes of all people are upon us” (John Winthrop, 1630).¹

The idea of the new nation, of America, as this “city on a Hill,” has been evoked by every president from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama.² I don’t doubt the sincerity of Winthrop’s words or vision. But as can be the case so easily, they conflate the vision God has for his church, with the vision mankind may have for their nation.³ And in doing so, the human heart can come to put its ultimate hope, and come to set its deepest faith, come to foster its greatest love, not for the City of God, but for the City of Man. Indeed, the eyes of our hearts search for the light, for a city upon a hill which we can give our deepest devotion to: in God’s mysterious ways, which are not the world’s ways, that light, that city upon the hill, is the little, at times weary and struggling, but indefatigable, local church.

Who are we, this little church community? What are we? We are the Light of the World; we are the city upon a hill. How does our light shine? I suggest three qualities of the Light, and in doing so identify three aspects of the purpose and vision of the local church: the Light is beauty, can blind, and gives warmth.

I. The Light is Beauty

Light is attractational; it draws your eye to it. Light can be, and often is, beautiful. In the prophecy from Isaiah 60:5, which is about God’s people, the Light *draws* people to it: “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.... Then you shall see, and be radiant” (Isaiah 60:1–3, 5). If a local church is to be the light of the Lord, its first priority is to be itself; for only by being itself does it begin to shine at all.

Christian scholar Stanley Hauerwas, in his book, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, reflects on the role the church plays in being an influence and blessing on the world around it. He states his purpose and main point thus:

“The central contention ... [is] to reassert that social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself.... Christians ... most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.... The primary social task of the church is to be itself—that is, a people who have been formed by a story that

provides them with the skills for negotiating the danger of this existence, trusting in God's promise of redemption."⁴

To be ourselves reminds us that in Christian love of others, *being* precedes *doing*. Who we are gives integrity and fuel to how we love.

So, who are we? What does it mean for us to shine with a light of beauty for which others take notice?

It means that we do what a Church is meant to do. We gather to **worship**, with burning sincerity and passion, the Almighty God, "who is blessed and only Sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who alone is immortal, who dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 6:15-16). It means we gather **under the Word of God**, which is a "lamp to our feet and a light to our path" (Psalm 119:105), and the word encourages us, admonishes us, and guides us. It means that together we practice the two great sacraments of our faith—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Which speak to humanity's need to be born again by the Spirit of God, and humanity's need to be fed afresh by the presence of God.

And it means that these realities—the One True God, the authoritative Word of God, and the waters of Baptism and the Body and Blood of Jesus—create a community that is unlike any community. It is open to all nations, all ethnicities, all social-classes; open to men and women, young and old. It means these realities create a unity that is stronger than the pull of nation, or party, or anything else that might divide. We may, and do, disagree strongly about some things, but what we agree upon—Jesus Christ, God's Son, our only true Hope—is like a magnet whose pull far outweighs the pull of any other allegiance. If we search to the bottom of your heart, and we find Jesus, then we have enough in common to bear the greatest of other differences. From our welcoming to our worship to our warmth towards one another, we are that city on a hill, never hidden. As we give expression to the life of God in our midst, we shine as lights in a dark world, and this is beautiful, this draws attention.

The beauty of our community, the quality of our life together, is our first apologetic. And beauty is precognitive and pre-argumentative apologetic. "No arguments or reasons have to be given to enable the experience of beauty."³ Before a rational cause needs to be offered, the beauty of a humble and loving local church finds its way into the hearts of neighbors. Like a beam of light shining between the crack of two drawn curtains, the quality of our life together will make a case to those who may have walls up toward Christianity. But you see as well as I do, that while light can be beautiful and draw our eyes, it can also blind. We need to see that when the light emanates, shines into the world, it does not always sit easily with the darkness.

II. The Light Can Blind

Back to Ephesians chapter 5. Paul not only explains what it means to be light, but he recognizes that the light always faces a potentially dangerous interaction with the darkness. Verses 8-11 explain:

At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Ephesians 5:7–10)

As light emanates outward from its source, even while it may aim to give lids and enlighten, it also can blind and expose. Imagine the dawning light illuminating a beautiful beach in Fiji so you can better see it and walk across it. Then, imagine the dawning light illuminating the beach at Normandy the day after D Day; it's the same light, but it reveals a very different landscape.

At the core of the light of a Christian community is the Truth of God's Word. This truth, as it reaches the ears of our neighbors, reveals both a resplendent landscape—you are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)—and a repulsive landscape—"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As we go out as light into the world, we must be on guard against fading into darkness. The church is no blessing to the world if it merely becomes the world, parrots the world, looks as much like the world as possible so it appeases the world. Paul says, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (Ephesians 5:11). We are both counter-cultural, distinct from the world; and yet, as light beams emanating from a lighthouse at night, we go out to help, guide, and save the ships of the world which are storm tossed and in peril.

You may be familiar with the two hymns "This World is Not My Home" and "This is My Father's World". Which is it? Both, and at the same time. As our church community shines among the culture and people of the Washington D.C. metro area, we at times will be welcome and other times not. The local Falls Church paper saw our community as bigots and pariahs over the years, largely due to our view that Jesus was the Son of God and the only way to be reconciled to the Father; and our view that the Bible is God's word and therefore we should follow it. That same paper lauded us with a full-page spread when we put on a food pantry during the pandemic.

Sometimes the light is beautiful and draws, other times it is too bright and will blind.

III. The Light Gives Warmth

Finally, what can we say about how the light blesses those around it; how does it give life? Paul says in the passage that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true” (Ephesians 5:9). The agricultural image is apt: the church’s presence in a community should give rise to good fruit: things we could describe as good, right, and true. This has always been the case.

The early Christian communities would find ways to care for widows and orphans, for the sick and most vulnerable. Recall Winthrop’s emphasis on these words from Micah, when he spoke to those early settlers: “Now the only way to avoid [...] shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, *to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God*. The warmth of our church, the warmth of our light, should be felt in many ways, but I would suggest one I hope we will lean into:

The body of Christ should be marked by particular care for the most vulnerable around it, and it should take responsibility for its community’s needs, not because of some standard of human justice it is trying to live up to, but rather, it takes responsibility because it is called by God to love—and to love in righteousness and mercy.

Part of the way the light shines in darkness throughout Scripture is this particular care for the most vulnerable—the light shines, Isaiah tells us, for those “walking in deep darkness” (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus comes “to comfort those who mourn” (Isaiah 61:3), and in a parable speaking of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, He tells us that whatever we do “for one of the least of these my brothers, we do for him” (Matthew 25:40).

As we shine as the Light of the Lord in our community and shine with Gospel words and Gospel deeds, we will sometimes feel blinding to people, but other times we will feel as the warmth of the sun upon cold and weary travelers. But as we conclude this series on being *Together in Christ amid Divisive Times*, let us remember that integral to our ability to shine will be our unity and our love for one another.

Endnotes

1. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *A Library of American Literature: Early Colonial Literature, 1607-1675*, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, eds. (New York: 1892), 304-307 <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/colliding-cultures/john-winthrop-dreams-of-a-city-on-a-hill-1630/> Accessed Nov. 7, 2020.
2. As noted by Abram Van Engen, "How America Became 'A City Upon a Hill': The rise and fall of Perry Miller," *Humanities*, Vol. 41, no. 1; (Winter, 2020), who writes, "It wasn't just Reagan who picked [the City upon a Hill language] up, either. After Miller, Winthrop's text has been quoted by almost every president to hold office: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama." Access online, <https://www.neh.gov/article/how-america-became-city-upon-hill>, last accessed Nov 6, 2020.
3. It's so easy to speak of a nation with terms meant—in their ultimate sense—for God's church and kingdom: "hope" was key term in Obama's presidency.
4. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: 1981).
5. Junius Johnson, *The Father of Lights: A Theology of Beauty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 18.