

LETTING YOUR LIGHT SHINE IN THE SIGHT OF ALL

- a Confirmation sermon based on Matthew 5:1-16

Text: “Jesus said to them, ‘You are like light for the whole world ... No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bowl; instead they put it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of all so that they will see the good things you do and give praise to your Father in heaven.’” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Whenever the telephone rang, our three teenagers would spring into action. And why not? The calls were usually for them, only rarely for their parents! However, we did have one rule that we observed: evening calls went unanswered until our dinner together was over. But, like every rule, this one got broken occasionally; so one dinner-time, when the telephone rang, our son Christian couldn't resist answering it. He politely took the caller's name and number, saying that his father would call back later. “Who was that, Chris?”, I asked. “It was Maria von Trapp.” “Maria von Trapp? You must be joking!” “No, I'm serious, Dad. She's the one, you know, who plays Julie Andrews in real life.” Well, he really was being serious and when I called back later, I found myself talking to one of my heroes in life, someone whose story you all know because of the movie, The Sound of Music.

As I was talking with her, the children (aided by their shameless mother) began singing loudly in the background: “Climb every mountain”. And if that weren't bad enough, they continued with “Do(e), a deer, a female deer”. After all, we'd seen the movie so often that they knew all the songs by heart. And I mention that second song in particular because it has a lot to do with Jesus' words we've just listened to in our Gospel reading. And a lot to do with the promises the candidates and the rest of us will be making later in this service.

You'll remember that as the new governess in the von Trapp household, Maria set out to teach the children to sing. And the first thing she has to do is to introduce them to the eight notes of the musical scale: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do. She'll do whatever it takes to make them familiar with those eight notes: “Fa(r) a long, long way to run; ti (tea), a drink with jam and bread, jam and bread”.

And that's just what Jesus did when he set out to teach his disciples not how to sing but how to live. How to live by God's law in all its richness and depth. And so Jesus' first step was to introduce them to the eight notes on another scale – God's scale of salvation. These notes sound the themes of the kingdom established by Jesus Christ, and they are rehearsed for us in those familiar verses that were just read from the Sermon on the Mount. The verses we call the Beatitudes. And Jesus tells us today, as he told his first followers, that if we learn those eight notes and echo them back faithfully in our lives, then we shall be blessed indeed.

In practical terms, what does that mean? It means that we recognize our need to be forgiven by God and strengthened and confirmed in our commitment to him; it means living pure and generous lives; it means being eager to show mercy and to work for peace; it means yearning for justice and being prepared to suffer for what is right in God's eyes. If those are the notes of faith by which your lives come to be recognized, then the light of God's love will shine through you in the sight of all, and praise will be given to our Father in heaven.

That's a lot to ask of you, so to help you do that, there's another scale with eight notes that the Church teaches us. These are the notes on our scale of commitment to Jesus. They sound the themes of the new life made possible by the Holy Spirit, and we shall be rehearsing them when we renew the Baptismal Covenant together this afternoon. And we can be assured that if we learn these eight notes and echo them back faithfully in our lives here in New Canaan and in Westport, then not only you and I but the world as well will be blessed indeed.

In the Baptismal Covenant a very specific commitment to Jesus is asked of us. A lifelong commitment which may seem to you “Mission Impossible”. And that's certainly the case, except “with God's help” and through sharing regularly with other faithful Christians in word and sacrament, prayer and fellowship. And how different that is from the father of a friend of mine who liked saying that the great thing about being an Episcopalian is that it has no effect at all on either your religion or your politics!

But, thank God, there are many whose lives clearly show the difference it makes if you take being a Christian and an Episcopalian seriously. Let me tell you about just two of them, an older man and a teenager.

Sadly he died just after I moved to Salem in southeastern Connecticut, so I didn't have the honor of meeting him. But his children have told me since then about his privileged upbringing, his education at Yale and his years in the American diplomatic service. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, he was serving in France as Vice-Counsel in Marseilles and was given special responsibility for issuing visas. To his surprise this "humble, deeply religious Episcopalian" (as one of his sons described him to me) found that he was holding peoples' lives in his hands. It was the greatest challenge of his life and he responded with energy, courage and resourcefulness. Acting directly against the orders of the State Department in Washington, he worked with the French Resistance, issued countless American visas to people fearing for their lives, personally escorted refugees to safety across the Spanish border, and hid some of the men and women most wanted by the Nazis in his own home. The artist Marc Chagall; the philosopher, Max Ernst; a winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics – in all, more than 2,500 Jewish people hunted by the Gestapo owe their lives to this devout and unassuming man from Salem, Connecticut. And two years ago, on May 30, 2006, Hiram Binaham IV was belatedly honored for his courageous witness by the issuing of a U.S. postage stamp depicting him. An ordinary Episcopalian who took his baptismal promises seriously and let his light shine in the sight of all.

And then there's Alex. When I met him not long ago, he was a high school senior in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. He had heard his rector speak about the desperate need in Ethiopia for treated bednets which can prevent the spread of malaria, one of the leading killers of young children in the developing world. Alex was president of the National Honor Society in his school, and with the help of its members he set up a table with pictures and posters outside the cafeteria. During the lunch breaks they collected money for bednets. Then Alex drafted his mother to help him raise additional funds at the local elementary school where she teaches. Though these efforts, which he called "Children Saving Children", he raised more than \$5,000.00. Five dollars buys one bednet and can save one life. Five thousand dollars can save a thousand lives. And the venture has done more than that; in Alex's words, "it has changed my life". He decided against applying to the Naval Academy in Annapolis and is now studying issues of global poverty at university instead. Alex can rejoice that because of him many children in the remote village of Korero in Ethiopia have now life to hope for and not an early death to fear. Another ordinary Episcopalian who is taking his baptismal promises seriously and letting his light shine in the sight of all.

And, finally, a word meant especially for the candidates.

I spent the month of February in Nelson, a town in the South Island of New Zealand. The prize exhibit at one of the local jewelers is the ring made especially for the movie version of Tolkien's story, Lord of the Rings. There's a scene in it that I hope you will remember as you are confirmed or received into the Episcopal Church this afternoon.

Gandalf the wizard is asking Frodo the hobbit, small creature though he may be, to undertake a great task. He is asking him to take the ring back to Mordor and, by doing so, to deliver the land from the evils that have befallen it. Frodo, understandably, is afraid of what this might mean, but in spite of that he stretches out his hand and takes hold of the ring. And then, as he puts the ring away for safekeeping, he hears himself say, "I will take the ring, though I know not the way".

"I will take the ring, though I know not the way." Today God is holding the ring out to each of you. Remember all the good things that God has done for you, and put your trust firmly in Jesus. Then, in the power of the Holy Spirit, take the ring and put it on. And as you journey with it, let your light shine in the sight of all. And may you bring great good to many – many you do not yet know – by keeping the promise you will each be making in a moment, the promise to follow Jesus Christ as your Savior and your Lord. Amen.