

September 17, 2023
Year A, Proper 19
“Letting Our Light Shine”

This is the kickoff Sunday for our annual stewardship campaign. For me, this is an exciting time. Lent and Advent are seasons for internal reflection and preparation. The stewardship campaign is an opportunity for our community to do the same. We are invited to take the time to reflect on our life in this beloved community and Grace’s role in the larger community. Let us acknowledge with GRATITUDE our joys, hopes, and aspirations, as we channel our Creator’s Love.

The slogan for this campaign is “Letting Our Light Shine.” *Matthew 5: 15-16* is the text chosen as the frame. This is the text that I will be considering with you this morning.

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.”

These two verses follow the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus lists those who are blessed in the eyes of God: the poor; the mourners; the meek; those who hunger, thirst and are persecuted for righteousness; the merciful; the pure of heart; and the peacemakers. He reminds his listeners that they/we are the “salt of the earth” and “the LIGHT of the world.”

Such a familiar passage, perhaps too familiar. Let’s examine it through the voice of an “other” – one of the blessed Jesus identified in the Beatitudes.

When I first heard our theme “Letting Our Light Shine,” I recalled a song by this name. After a little research, I found the song. I was a little off with the name. The correct title is *Let your Light Shine on Me*. It was written in the 1920s by a gospel blues singer, guitarist, and evangelist named Blind Willie Johnson. The lyrics were based upon today’s Gospel reading, Matthew 5:16. It is in fact the song we sang at the beginning of the service, our opening song.

Blind Willie Johnson was born in 1897 in a very small town south of Waco, Texas. His parents were sharecroppers. At age 5 he started playing a cigar box guitar, a gift from his father. Although he had poor eyesight from birth, his biographers believe he was blinded at age 7 by his stepmother. She threw lye water in his face during a family argument concerning her infidelity. He died in Beaumont Texas in 1945 of malaria. He had suffered the repeated bouts of the disease for a year. No hospital would care for him because he was Black. His last months were spent living alone in the ruins of his burnt-out home.

Blind Willie aspired to be a Baptist preacher from a young age and became a well-known itinerant evangelist in Texas. His gift was his music; his passion evangelism – sharing the Good News. He shared his gift with all who would listen. He knew the Lord. The lyrics of his music

were inspired from the Bible as reflected by the Spirit. He recorded 30 songs in the 1920s for a Columbia race record label. One year his records outsold those of Bessie Smith.

He sang in a harsh, gravelly bass voice intended to be heard by those passing outside the church. His natural range was tenor. His music has been characterized as “fierce” and “not unlike the ‘Hell and Damnation’ style of a Baptist preacher.” It was powerful in effect and spoke directly to those listening. He was arrested in New Orleans for attempting to incite a riot for singing his song *If I Had My Way, I'd Tear the Building Down* in front of the Custom House on Canal Street. You may know this song if you are of a certain age as Peter, Paul and Mary performed a very popular version in the 1960s.

Let your Light Shine on Me is Blind Willie's straightforward plea to the Creator for her presence and support. This song is the anthem to frame a ministry. A ministry inspired by these two verses from Matthew.

The first verse of the song is:

*“Let it shine on me, Let it shine on me.
Oh, let Your light from the lighthouse shine on.
Let it shine on me, Let it shine on me.
Oh, let Your light from the lighthouse shine on.”*

This prayer, simple and profound, and for me both inspirational AND aspirational. The first phrase is a request for our creator's presence – “Let it shine on me.” The second, “let Your light from the lighthouse shine on,” a plea that the light be shared in the world. “Let Your [our Creator's]... light shine on.” Letting our Creator's light shine through us.

Within the body of the song is a simple confession of faith.

*“My Lord, he's done just what he said ...
Heal the sick and raise the dead.”*

Here Blind Willie, the evangelist, is testifying to God's light for our world. We know God by his actions. God is steadfast.

*“I know I've got religion and I ain't ashamed ...
Angels in Heaven, done wrote my name.”*

Blind Willie throughout it all knows that he is God's beloved. Even though he was blind, Johnson saw God's light. Even though he was poor and illiterate, he knew Jesus.

WE are the light of the world, the light gifted to us from our creator. It is our light at Grace - the light of love and community. We are privileged to channel God's Love.

Brian McClaren is a public theologian and prolific author. His most recent book is entitled *Do I Stay Christian? A guide for the doubters, the disappointed, and the disillusioned*. I commend this book as a thoughtful, honest assessment of the state of Christianity today. Spoiler alert. He concludes, after acknowledging all the horrible things done in the past and continuing today in the name of Christianity, that the answer is YES!

In answering the question, “How?” to stay Christian, he quotes the theologian Catherine Keller who said it is “not what we say *about* God but how we *do* God.” It is “not what we say *about* God but how we *do* God.” An often-quoted observation from James Baldwin is “I can't believe what you say because I see what you do.” Dean Kelly Brown Douglas and others in the Episcopal Church call us to “be Church!”

“Be Church?” As we sit this morning in this beautiful building in an amazing pocket of creation, it is clear that being Church involves maintenance, staff, heat and all the necessities of maintaining a home. This building is a sanctuary, a place of safety. It is where we come in person, or for some virtually, for support, community, enrichment, and nurture. This is, as the Celts say, a “Thin Place,” an area of energy where the veil between this world and the eternal is thin. I for one am grateful for both its presence and the call to support it.

“Be Church?” We at Grace have defined our community by four declarative words – Inclusion, Service, Discovery, Gratitude. This is the frame for how we “*do* God.” This is the frame of our response to the challenge of James Baldwin. What we say can be believed because of what we do. They are colors of light we hold true. These are the colors in which the world sees us.

Tootie and Mike have taken on the role of leading us in discernment. This is a time to reflect on what our Grace community means to us individually, to our families, and to the community at large. This is a time to prayerfully consider our role and response.

Our church building was built to let the light in. Those of us who sit on the Walker Hall side of the sanctuary experience this in abundance in spring and summer. In addition to having masks available as we enter, I wonder at times about also having sunglasses. A few of weeks ago, Eric announced that he had just had the windows cleaned and so now, the light can more abundantly shine in on us. Our response to this Stewardship appeal will “let our light shine” into each other’s lives and into the world.

Amen