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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, our Lord Jesus calls us to be light amidst darkness:

<sup>14</sup>You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. (Matthew 5:13-20, RSV)

A typical house in the ancient Middle East had few windows—maybe one or two or maybe even none at all. The light of a lamp, then, was a precious thing.

In fact, for most of human history, the light of a lamp was something to be cherished. When a modern art restorer, for example, works on some masterpiece, he or she can have light of every brilliance and wavelength cast upon the work at hand. But the original artist might have had to confine his work to daylight hours simply to have enough light to do the work. Come the setting of the sun, the artist would have to set aside his brushes unless he is able to arrange lamps to permit him to carry on. Perhaps he is in the midst of a certain detail, perhaps she is being swept along by inspiration. No matter. Without a lamp, the work must come to a stop.

Without a lamp, the beautiful flow of music from the pen of Bach would have to pause until the morning. But with a lamp, those miracles of composition could continue in the evening.

Without a lamp, young Abraham Lincoln in his boyhood home in southern Indiana would have to set aside his Bible or what few other books he could borrow. But with a lamp, the moral formation of that great young man could continue in the night hours.

Without a lamp, the poor, frightened child lost in the woods at night might not be found, but with a lamp the searchers can search on, and the child might see that speck of light at a distance and come running back to safety.

We flick a switch and the lights go on. We are so accustomed to light in the nighttime that perhaps we forget what a blessing the light is. I still smile at the memory of Margie Reyer—I think that's who it was—surprising me by saying that she feared the countryside and felt safer in the city. Why? Because of light in the nighttime! And all the ladies of the power table seemed to agree with her. The countryside is spooky because it is so dark. Give us some light in this world!

So, no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket. That makes no sense. Light is too precious to be squandered like that. In fact, coving the lamp

with the basket is liable to extinguish the lamp as the flame starves for oxygen and then goes out. Put one of our offering baskets over our eternal candle lamp here at Immanuel, for example, and that poor flame will soon go out.

And perhaps there is a lesson for us in this simple law of nature. If Jesus would have us to be light, then either we shine on, or we might well lose what we have. Light is meant to illumine things. Deprived of that natural effect, light often sputters and goes out. Likewise with us: If we be not shining before others with our good works, then bit by bit, we are dimming ourselves. And we should worry lest our own hearts and minds should end up in darkness.

Jesus is pretty direct about the matter. We are to let our lights shine, aye, and shine for a purpose: so that other folks can see our good works:

<sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, *so that* they may see your good works... (Matthew 5:16, NRSV)

When it comes to virtue, Christians are not to be bashful. We are not to be secretly good, but mediocre out there in the world, as if we shy away from drawing attention to ourselves and would rather simply blend in. Why? Well, three reasons come quickly to mind: We should let our light shine before others and let them behold our good deeds for the sake of ourselves, for the sake of our neighbors, and for the sake of our God.

## **FOR OUR OWN SAKE**

First, we should let our light shine before others because we should want to be true to ourselves in all things. We do not want to praise God in the quiet of our own home or church, but then praise the devil out in the world so as to blend in with the crowd. Integrity asks us to carry virtue out into the world. Let there be no double dealing with ourselves. We deserve better than that. We do not want to unmake ourselves through hypocrisy, forsaking the good deeds God meant for us and then having to be so uneasy before the Lord at the Last Judgment.

## **FOR OUR NEIGHBORS**

Second, for the sake of our neighbors we should let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works. Our neighbors need our good deeds. They need them, not only because it benefits them to be dealing with virtuous people, but also because they need some encouragement that they might be good themselves.

I love pre-marriage counseling with young people. Their idealism is so high when it comes to marriage. Their hopes and dreams are so noble and I try to urge them on. And one point I always try to make to them: our world needs examples of good marriages. Our neighbors should be able to look at our marriages and receive some encouragement from them. We don't need to be saints or geniuses. But we do need to understand that our lives can function as light for other people.

More than any discourse we could contrive, our daily deeds are the things that can tug at the heart of our neighbors.

We want to win souls for Christ. We want to be living illustrations of the kinds of things Jesus talks about in his Sermon on the Mount. We want to be walking, talking examples of an alternative of life — a way of life marked by purity of heart, hope, meekness, righteousness, mercy, even that we should be peacemakers. I remember Richard John Neuhaus telling me the tale of how he once came upon two strangers punching each other and wrestling with each other, rolling around on the sidewalks of New York City. He stood over them and commanded them to stop. They looked up at him and said “Why?” And in exasperation he answered, “Because I am a priest!” And that made sense to them. They stopped. They seemed to feel that it is appropriate for a priest to be a peacemaker, because it is appropriate for Christians to be peacemakers.

To us, a treasure has been entrusted. To every Christian an alternative manner of life has been given. It is a manner of life built on the solid foundation, Jesus Christ. We should want to draw our neighbors to Jesus and to his way of life, but they need some encouragement along these lines. They need to see that a different way of life is *possible*. And they need to know it is possible because they see it illustrated in us. Let your light so shine before others that they may *see* your good works.

## FOR OUR GOD

And our text clearly gives a third reason for letting our light shine before others. It is for the sake of our God:

<sup>6</sup>Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and *give glory to your Father who is in heaven*.  
(Matthew 5:6, RSV)

Later today, after this morning’s liturgy, we have Catechism Instruction. One of our topics for today is the Second Commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” I take this to be the great commandment behind letting our light shine before others. We do not want to bring dishonor to the name of God by being known as Christians, yet also being known as nothing special. Or worse, we do not want to dishonor the name of God by betraying his goodness with our vices or shabbiness of life. So, let us live out in the world in such a way that people will look our good deeds and think well of God because of what they see.

## LIFTING THE YOKE

Later in this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus teaches that the moral law of Israel is valid for his disciples:

<sup>17</sup>Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.  
<sup>18</sup>For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18, KJV)

This means, for example, that the beautiful preaching of Isaiah in our First Lesson applies to us too. The whole Bible gives us instruction about the good deeds we should do, that our light might shine before others. Consider, for example, today's passage from Isaiah 58, where the Lord says this:

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? <sup>8</sup>*Then* your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly... (Isaiah 58:6-8, RSV)

Isaiah's language is poetic, but I think we can get its point and imagine applications in our own lives. For example, through his prophet Isaiah, the Lord asks his people to "undo the thongs of the yoke." We are talking about burdens that weigh people down. The yoke is held in place by leather thongs. Perhaps the ox would be glad to toss that yoke aside. With a toss of its mighty neck, the beast could hurl that yoke away. But he can't! The thong prevents him. The thong ties that yoke down onto his neck, and so the ox must labor on, weighed down by all the weight behind.

There are people like that in our town—people weighed down by burdens. You might have such people for colleagues at work or even members of your family. No one seems to like them. Who knows why? Perhaps they share in the blame. But they acquired their poor reputation years ago, and no one seems now to be willing to give them a second chance. They would gladly toss aside their poor standing, but cannot. It is as if people's opinions are set in place, tethered down by leather thongs. Still, you could be the one to loosen the thong of the yoke. You could be the one to start acting even more as if you cherish that one.

And if you do, people will notice. Your light will be shining. You will be reminding the world that with the Lord there is forgiveness and a chance for a

second start. The Lord would have us who bear his name to give folks a second chance too.

Or there are people who through no fault of their own are bearing the yoke of frailty or loneliness. I mentioned during last Sunday's Voters' Assembly that I worry about our Meals on Heels program. Davida Goldman, who directs the program, needs more cooks and more walkers. Saturdays come along in their relentless way. If we do not have enough cooks and walkers, Davida fills in the gaps herself, only she is getting too frail herself to keep doing that. We do not want to wear her entirely out. And the program is a good one, because there are poor elderly folks in our neighborhood who are burdened by the yoke of poverty, loneliness, and disability. Our Meals on Heels programs helps loosen the thongs of the yoke. On Saturdays at midday, light goes radiating out into our community because our Meals on Heels walkers are radiating out into our community.

We are to be bearers of light in a world that sure needs some light. So, shine on! And in your shining know that the One who is the true Light of the world, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is going to shine upon you. Whatever darkness this world can muster is bound to be blown away by Jesus. The dullness of Alzheimer's, the discouragement of poverty or illness, the confusion of shifting morality and courtesy, even the blackness of the grave — all such darkness is going to flee away from you, and the little light that your life should contribute to his world will be taken up in His great light. I mean, we will be taken up by Jesus Christ, the very Light of the world, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.