

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 9, 2016
“Reflecting the Light” (Matthew 5:13-20)

During the early days of trains, a flagman would take his place in the middle of the street, stopping all traffic as a train approached. During the day, he would hold up a stop sign. At night, he would wave a lantern. There is an old story about a flagman and his lantern that goes like this.

There was an accident one dark night at a railroad crossing. A lawsuit followed, and during the proceedings the flagman was called to take the witness stand. The prosecuting attorney asked the usual questions, then followed with an important one: *On the night of the accident, when you saw the car approaching, did you wave the lantern?* The flagman answered, *Yes, I waved the lantern.*

The attorney for the prosecution continued with other questions, but before long came back to the same one, *Did you wave that lantern?* The flagman answered, *Yes, I did wave the lantern.* The case seemed to hinge on this bit of testimony, and the prosecutor realized it. So, once more he thundered, *I ask you again, when you saw the car approaching the crossing, did you wave the lantern?* Once again, the flagman answered, *Yes, I waved the lantern.* The railroad company won the case and no damages were allowed.

Later, the defense attorney was talking with the flagman. He said, *The prosecuting attorney really had me worried when he kept asking, “Did you wave the lantern? Did you wave the lantern?” Well,* said the flagman, *What worried me was that he might ask “Was the lantern lit?”*

There is so much waving of dead lanterns. And this morning, I want us to think about our own. Do we have our lamps brightly lit so they shine for all to see? Or are they so dim they barely cast a shadow?

The purpose of lanterns and lamps is to give light – to shine. The Bible has some important things to say about lamps and shining. Psalm 119 tells us that God’s own Word is *a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.* We heard in last week’s text how the prophet Isaiah prophesied that the coming Messiah would be *a light to the Gentiles.* And Jesus describes himself as the Light of the World. In our gospel reading for today, he says to us, *You are the light of the world.*

When Jesus commands his followers to be the lights of the world, he calls us to be like himself. As lights, we are not to be like the flagman’s dead lantern, but rather, we are to shine – not as a flickering flame, but as a bright and steady light.

According to Bible commentator, William Barclay, Jesus means three things when he calls us to be lights of the world. He is telling us first and foremost that light is something which is meant to be seen. The homes in ancient Palestine were very dark. Usually, there was only one small window, so lamps were very important. If it were placed under a bushel basket, it was of no help. The lamp’s primary duty was to be seen.

Likewise, our faith is something which is meant to be seen – and I don’t mean just here in church. Faith that is checked at the door when we leave is of no use to anyone.

Truth is, it should be even more visible out there in the world as we go about our everyday activities. It should be visible in the way we treat the cashier at the grocery store, in the way we order a meal in restaurant, in the way we perform our jobs, in the way we drive, in the language we use. Our Christian faith should be visible in the workplace, in the classroom, on the golf course, on the football field, or wherever we might find ourselves. Jesus did not say, *You are the light of the church*. He said, *You are the light of the world*; therefore, our faith should be evident to all.

Barclay says the second purpose of light is to serve as a guide. Perhaps some of you have lights at the end of your drive or landscaping lights along the sidewalk leading to your front door. These are intended to guide visitors when they enter your driveway or home at night. They make clear the way.

And that's what Christians are called to do. We're called to be an example or positive influence. We sometimes find ourselves with a group of people who are being uncharitable, and it's easy to go along with whatever they are doing. But what a light is called to do is lead them in another direction. It is the job of the Christian to speak up and say, *We shouldn't gossip – even if what is being said is true*; or *That's an offensive joke or inappropriate prank*; or *What you're planning to do is unwise*.

Many in such groups don't have the moral courage to speak out against things that are wrong, but will oftentimes stand with the one who objects and points to a better way. As lights, we are to guide and positively influence others, providing them the lead they need to take a stand – something they would not do on their own.

The third thing a light can do, Barclay says, is offer warning. Occasionally, while driving down the interstate, we will encounter a flashing light in the shape of an arrow pointing one way or another. This light tells us to move into another lane. It warns us of obstacles or dangers that lie ahead. When we see a friend, neighbor or family member headed in the wrong direction and potentially toward danger, it is our Christian duty to issue the warning.

This is not an easy task, or one we quickly embrace. We often don't want to get involved or think we might do more harm than good, but if our warnings are given in love – without judgment or criticism – they can be effective. Wouldn't it be better to speak up than to see that person's tragedy unfold and realize we did nothing to help prevent it.

The light that can be seen, the light that guides, and the light that warns are the lights we are to be.

Waving our lanterns certainly challenges the ways we live. Still, we should be thankful that Jesus calls us to be lights. The fact that we are lights of the world comes only through the miracle of God's grace. We, who live in the darkness of sin and the separation from God caused by our sin, are lights only because we have been touched and transformed by Christ.

We are not lights because of any merit or worthiness of our own, not because of our intellect or ability, not because of our position or social standing, but because Christ has called us out of the darkness and into his marvelous light.

And when we get right down to it, the light is his and his alone. You and I do not possess light in and of ourselves, but are more like reflectors. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, we are to reflect the light of God's Son. And to do that properly, we need to stay close to the true Light.

I'm at that age – as many of you are – that reading has become a challenge. The size of the print often dictates that I move closer to the light if I am to see the words. That's the challenge for us as Christians – to move closer to the Light. We do this through regular worship where we hear God's word and share in the sacraments, through faithful reading and study of the Bible, and through daily prayer. Through these disciplines and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we maintain our closeness to Jesus who is the source of all light. And that closeness enables us to better be the lights he has called us to be.

We are lights, Jesus says. And as such, we are to shine. A dead lantern does not serve its purpose. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. A lamp put under a bushel basket cannot give light to all in the house. Furthermore, Jesus says, *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

We repeat these words of Jesus at every baptism as we present the baptismal candle: *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* That's the ultimate purpose of our lives – to show forth the praises of him who has called us out of the darkness and into his marvelous light.

The reality is that not all of us can be chandeliers in important places. Some of us have to be thankful to be the 60-watt bulb on the back porch. But even there, we have a purpose – to shine the gospel light that takes away the world's darkness and despair, replacing it with a ray of hope and faith in the promises of God. Amen.