

I am the Light of the World (John 8: 12-20)

Gospel of John Sermon Series

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When people ask how Will and I met, Will likes to answer that he was hanging out in a bar and I came in looking to save souls.

That is not accurate.

The truth is, one of our first conversations took place on a warm summer night, on the front steps of a big house in South Minneapolis. We were guests at mutual friend's birthday party, and we both stepped out at the same time for some air.

In the course of the usual introductions, Will asked me what I did. I explained that I was a hospital chaplain and in the process of being ordained as a minister.

I saw him take this in, digest it, clearly searching for an appropriate response. I would learn, later, that he was raised Irish Catholic and had not encountered many women of the cloth before.

“So, when did you find Jesus?” he asked politely.

I blinked, and thought about it, and finally said, “Well, I don’t really think about Jesus in those terms.”

“Oh,” he said. “OK. How do you think about him?”

And so I attempted to explain my complex thoughts and feelings about Jesus to a near-stranger. It was the beginning of a great romance.

If you’re a Facebook user, you’re probably familiar with the relationship status field where you indicate if you’re

single, or partnered, or (my favorite), “It’s complicated.”
That’s my relationship with Jesus. It’s complicated.

Take, for example, today’s scripture reading. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

That sounds lovely, right? But I confess I find myself identifying a bit with the Pharisees here. I’m a little suspicious of these enormous claims, especially given the exclusive way they’re so often interpreted, where Jesus is *the* Light of the World, *the only Light*, the one path, the one true way, and anyone who doesn’t agree is in darkness.

You will never find me characterizing Jesus that way.
You’ll never hear me announce that Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior, or that I found Jesus, or that Jesus found me. I’m practically allergic to that kind of language.

And why? Because I've heard it used as a weapon against people of different faiths, and no faith. I've seen that understanding of Jesus built up as a wall to separate believers from nonbelievers. I've seen that Jesus used as a tool to shame people who have doubts or who question authority.

I don't like that version of Jesus very much. That's not a Jesus that I particularly want to rally behind.

But let's return to the text. Let's think about why Jesus says what he says, and who, exactly, he's addressing.

First, we must remember that these are not Jesus' actual words. They're John's words, which are different from Matthew's words, or Mark's words, or Luke's words. And John, or whoever wrote the Gospel of John, is a Jew, talking to other Jews, trying to convince them that following Jesus is a legitimate way to practice Judaism.

When Jesus says, “I am the light of the world,” it’s not just a lovely universal image. It’s likely a reference to an image which Jews of that day would understand: the flame of the temple lamps that were lit during the festival of Sukkot, when Jews made a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem to remember God’s deliverance in the story of the Exodus.

So here is the context: the Book of John was written *after* the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. Various Jewish communities are trying to figure out how they will function without the Temple and its lamps and its rituals. How will they continue to be Jewish when their most sacred, most holy, place is gone?

That is the atmosphere into which the Jesus movement is born, and thrives, because the Gospel writers are saying, “Yes, the Temple has been destroyed. But here’s some hope. Here’s a walking, talking Temple that overcame death. His name is Jesus.”

Other Jews found their new identity not in a person, nor in a building, but in the tradition of Torah. They found other ways to maintain their identity and practices, giving rise to the Rabbinical Jewish movement.

But a small community of Jews, and eventually non-Jews as well, found this Jesus phenomenon very compelling.

And so they formed little communities organized around what they trusted to be a very hopeful story: a story where the very worst things can happen (the temple is destroyed, your beloved teacher is executed), but *God is not defeated. God's love survives.*

I don't know about you, but 2,000 years later, that message is still compelling. I could really use that message right now, that resurrection message that promises us that the story is not over.

I could also use some courage to proclaim that promise boldly, to anyone who will hear it, to be clear and unwavering about my most deeply-held values, my faith, my sense of what is true and good. I want to echo Jesus when he says, in response to criticism, “My testimony is valid, because I know where I have come from and I know where I am going.”

I want to give you an example from my own life. As many of you know, with the support of this church, I’ve been involved in trying to launch a safe gathering space for LGBTQ youth in greater Northfield. What I’m hoping is that we can offer a community-based space that is wholeheartedly and unapologetically devoted to the radical idea that LGBTQ lives matter.

In my view, there are still far too many places where the equality and worth of LGBTQ people is a matter of debate. Where people say, well, you need to consider all points of

view, or, well, what about the rights of anti-LGBTQ religious people? Shouldn't those be protected too?

I'm tired of it. I'm tired of giving an inch to people who doubt my basic humanity, especially if they do so in the name of religion. I'm just not willing to debate anymore.

I know I'm not alone in that. But the people in power don't agree. And I fear that the policies of our new president and vice-president and cabinet will fuel the flames of homophobia and transphobia - as well as every fear about all marginalized people - for years and years to come.

You have probably read that within minutes of the inauguration, the official White House website was scrubbed of references to civil rights, LGBTQ rights, healthcare, immigration, and climate change. And yesterday, the White House press secretary attacked the media for *accurately* reporting the number of people who attended the inauguration.

These are acts of erasure. And as one colleague said, they may be the canary in the coal mine - a portent of things to come.

This is my truth: in the stories told by our new president and vice-president, I see death. I see defeat. I see no way out. And it makes me want to despair because I lived in those stories and I've seen people die in those stories.

So I have to embody another story. A story of light. A story of grace. A story that begins with the assumption that God created all of us in God's image, regardless of whom we love or what kind of body we have, no matter whether we were born into privilege or poverty.

And I have to be able to say, clearly, like Jesus, that "My testimony is valid, because I know where I have come from and I know where I am going."

I challenge all of us to figure out what those words mean to us. What is our testimony? What is that each of us know to be true because we have lived it and witnessed it? What is it that lights our path into the future, even dimly?

Because we don't have a map, that's for sure. "What would Jesus do?" is not a question we can easily answer right now.

But we do have a little light within us. The little light of conscience that tells us when something is very wrong, *and* when something is very right. In these days, I'm trying to pay extra close attention to my little light, and to put my light in conversation with the lights that others carry. I hope to magnify the lights of others, especially people whose lights have been ignored or obscured by the powerful.

We saw that yesterday at the Women's March on Washington and sister marches across the country and

the world. Turnout was high. Very, very high. Experts are now estimate the Women's March was the largest mass protest in United States history, 2.9 million strong.

I told Will, eight years ago, that I hadn't found Jesus, not in the sense that most people mean it. But now I wonder if Jesus can be discovered in those collective pools of light that happen when people come together this way, with clarity of purpose and new momentum. Thousands and thousands of lights, light upon light upon light, creating one great illumination that says no to death and yes to life.

Let's keep saying it, in our own authentic ways, whatever those may be, over and over again. And may our testimony be valid, because we know where we came from and, God willing, where we are going.

Amen.

