

## The True Light that Gives Light to Everyone

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

John 1:1-10

There's a sort of a joke that David Foster Wallace tells at the beginning of his brilliant 2003 Kenyon College commencement address. It goes like this. 'There are these two young fish swimming along in the sea, 'and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The old fish nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?"' And the two young fish nod back, give each other a perplexed look, and keep swimming in silence. Eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What in heaven's name is water?"

It works OK as a joke, but it works even better as a parable of human attention. It works best as a parable of how we human beings see; or rather, how we don't see. Sometimes it's the most important things in life that we have the hardest time seeing. Sometimes the things that are the most present to us are the things we look right past. For instance, if you live in Michigan, you probably don't really see the trees. You see them, but you don't really see them. But go live in Shiprock, New Mexico for a while, or go live in Los Alamos for a year, and then come back, and I promise you will see the trees like you have never seen them before.

This evening I would like to suggest that, to us and our culture, Jesus can become like the water became to those two young fish: a great life giving presence whom most folk don't even recognize. John understands how this goes. He makes it clear that Jesus' light is everywhere. Jesus is the world's logos, he is the Word, the organizing principle of creation. All things have been made through him and without him, not one thing was made. He is the true light and this light illuminates all people. Jesus shines everywhere. And yet, as verse 10 says: "though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him." The water is all around people, but they don't know its name. The light shines in all places, but people don't see it. Tonight I want to help you see the light. I want to help you see how incredibly significant Jesus has been and continues to be in our culture, all the places his light shines where you might not even notice. As I do that I want to acknowledge my debt to John Ortberg and his book "Who is This Man?" Which I found to be a good, accessible study of Jesus' influence in this world.

There's a lot to say about the way Christ's light shines in our culture, but I will restrict myself to just three areas. **First, just to name the times and the places of our western world is to walk in the light of Jesus.** John Ortberg helped me see this when he pointed out that, according to three major points of reference, his whole life was connected to Jesus. Three major points of reference for all people are, Who am I? Where am I? What day is it? Ortberg realized that when he answered those basic orientation questions all three of them were answered with respect to Jesus. What year is it? 2018. A number that we all throw out without thinking, but that number is a Jesus number. The light of the world is in that number. When we say 2018 we are saying it has been 2018 years since Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. We measure time with respect to this man. Whether people realize it or not, every time we give the year we are acknowledging that history changed when Mary laid her baby in the manger. Who am I? When Ortberg answered that question he told people his name was John. His parents named him after the beloved disciple, the one who wrote the words of this passage and the words of this whole amazing gospel. Whether he saw it or not, every time John Ortberg said his name the light of Christ was shining. He was being reminded, that he too was beloved of God. Where am I? In the

case of Ortberg, he is a preacher in Menlo Park Presbyterian Church which is located in San Francisco. San Francisco is names after Saint Francis, the amazing 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian man who gave up his wealth and comfort to live a life of poverty and care for the poor. Whether he was conscious of it or not, every time Ortberg named his city, the light of Christ was shining. The value of sacrificial love was raised up through the name of this saint. So that's the first thing to say: Jesus shines out in the basic way we mark time and space in our world.

**Second, Jesus also shines out in the way we look at and treat individual human beings.** The Declaration of independence famously starts out by saying that "*all men – all people - are created equal.*" And all people "*are endowed with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*" The Declaration also says, "*we hold these truths to be self-evident.*" Self-Evident. Of course all people are created equal! Of course all people have the right to life and liberty. The Declaration is right about these ideas being self-evident... if you grew up in the west. In this country and in most western cultures we do think all people are created equal. You would be hard pressed to find a person who would say that they think a child of a poor laborer is more valuable than the child of a billionaire. You would be hard pressed to find a person who would say baby girl with down syndrome is less valuable than a healthy boy. For our society the equal value of these persons is self-evident. But I would argue that these things are self-evident everywhere. I would argue that it is the light of Jesus shining in our culture that makes these things self-evident. In the earliest Egyptian dynasties, when a pharaoh died, he used to have his slaves killed and buried with him. That wasn't the action of a culture who found the equality of all people self-evident. Evidently they thought Pharaoh was much more valuable than these others. The Roman culture into which Jesus came could be really cruel with the weak members of their society. If a child was malformed at birth, or if a child was not the correct gender, these cultures would expose the child, leave them exposed out in the wild where they would die. The Romans clearly did not believe that all persons were created equal. The early Christian church rejected exposure. The Didache, and early second century summary of Christian teaching and liturgy, forbade it. In fact Christians were known for caring for exposed infants. They did this because they served a Lord who was born in a semi-exposed stable, who called his followers to love the least of these, and who died a slave's death. That all these people were created equal was self-evident to them because their master taught them to welcome children and to touch lepers.

Before he was a Christian, Malcom Muggeridge went to Calcutta to watch Mother Theresa do her work. Mother Theresa would take these broken and dying people from the streets and care for them, she made sure that they died surrounded by love and care instead of leaving them to die alone. Watching all this work, at some point Muggeridge came to the forceful realization that humanists do not run Leprosariums. Jesus was behind this amazing compassion. The light of Jesus was shining in Mother Theresa's work. We should be profoundly grateful that our society still has a basic instinct to care about the weak and the poor, to hold as self-evident that every child is valuable and deserves life and liberty and love. The light of Jesus is a huge part of why we believe these things. Whether they know it or not, even people who don't call themselves Christians believe these things because the light of the Jesus has shone in this world. So Jesus' light shines in the way we think of and treat people.

**Finally whenever we enjoy the benefits of science and learning we are being blessed by Jesus' light.** It's a pretty well-known fact that most of America's greatest universities had their origins in the Christian faith. Harvard and Yale were both founded as theological colleges for the training of ministers. Today if you look at Harvard's crest you will see the schools motto:

‘veritas.’ Truth. That motto is a condensation of the original motto which was, “Truth for Christ and the Church.” Yale’s motto is light and truth and if you look at Yale’s crest you will see two Hebrew words written in Hebrew letters: ‘Ummim and Thummim.’ These are the names of the stones that the priests used to discern the will of God in the Old Testament. I assume that the founders of Yale wished all to know that this was a place where young men and women discerned the will of God for their life. It was a specifically Christian place. Both colleges have utterly Biblical origins. Jesus’ light drove people to found these institutions.

That story is fairly well-known, but we can say more. It was no coincidence that Christians were the ones who founded these institutions, because the things Jesus taught, the things Christians believe, are particularly friendly to the study of science and the pursuit of learning. Christians teach that God created an orderly world, this world had patterns that human beings could learn and discern. Christians believed that the world was Good, it was not an evil realm to be escaped (which wouldn’t lead to study), nor was it was a sacred object to be worshipped (which would also keep people from study); it was good thing to be engaged. In fact God created it good and he loved it enough to die for it. That means study of this world and discernment of its patterns and principles was a worthy pursuit, a blessed vocation. Whether they acknowledge it or not, wherever men and women pursue the study of science and higher learning, they owe a debt of gratitude to Jesus, the light of the world.

A place where you see that working itself out in a specific way is the monasteries. In his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill tells the story of how, when the Huns and the Goths were sacking Rome and burning all the libraries and destroying the repositories of knowledge that Rome had built,

Monks living in monasteries in places like Ireland were one of the few communities dedicated to preserving ancient learning. The monks copied books. First and foremost they preserved the Bible. But the monks, believing in the goodness of creation and instructed by the theology of men like Augustine who said “all truth is God’s truth,” also copied manuscripts and books from other civilizations too. According to the great Christian Historian Jaroslav Pelikan, “one may perhaps begin to comprehend how completely Christ the Monk conquered the scholarly world of the Middle Ages by checking, in the standard modern editions, how many works of antiquity even exist for us today only because they were copied by monks in some medieval Scriptorium... [works of] not only Christian saints but of classical and pagan authors.”

Whenever a person enjoys the benefits of science and learning, whether they know it or not, they are being blessed by Jesus’ light.

That’s only three small areas. I haven’t even begun to talk about Jesus’ influence on art and architecture, on the formation of hospitals, on the abolition of slavery, on the civil rights movement, on the lives of billions of ordinary people, rich and poor, small and powerful. It’s really an amazing thing. Here is a man born in poverty to a Jewish carpenter. Here is a man who started a movement, but by the time he died, had been abandoned by all of his followers and yet two thousand years later he has more than a billion followers in the world and Jaroslav Pelikan can write without fear of contradiction, “*Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in Western Culture for almost 20 centuries.*” How can that be? It can be because of the power of God. It can be because as John says, this man is God’s one and only Son, who came from the Father full of Grace and truth. Let us lift up our eyes and see his light, let that light burn in us, so that the rest of the world can see it too.