

**Hospitality and Evangelism**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
October 13, 2019-AM Service  
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Matthew 5:13-16

The first part of this text is a little different from the part I am going to meditate on. The first part of the text, verse 13, is a warning about keeping our character and knowing who we are. That's a fundamental requirement of Good hospitality and good evangelism. If we don't have the grace and strength and truth of Jesus in us. If we are not a healthy supportive community living in his love, then we don't have anything to share with the world. The salt is no good if it loses its saltiness. That's an important point and you will hear more about that point in a later sermon. But now let's hear the rest of the text. Verses 14-16 are not about keeping your saltiness; they're about getting the salt out of the saltshaker. Or, to use Jesus' new image, they're about making sure that the light that is in us shines out into the world. We can't just keep this light to ourselves, warming ourselves by its heat, we're supposed to shine it out there. Listen to Matthew 5:14-16.

So this is one of the passages in Scripture where we hear the call to evangelism. *"Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* Before others. These 'others' are not the people in here, your fellow Christians. These others are those on the outside. The good news of the gospel creates light within this community and some of the light that is in us is for the blessing of each other, but this text reminds us that it's not just for us, it's meant for others too. And we hear this call throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, God holds up the nation of Israel as a beacon of his goodness. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham that through his descendants all nations will be blessed. Isaiah calls Israel 'a banner on a hill'. All the nations see her waving on that hill and they stream to her. In the New Testament the banner on a hill becomes a church on a mission. The church is sent out into the world. In the great commission Jesus tells the church, "Go make disciples of all nations," and later on in Acts he says, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." We know about these texts. We know we're called to do evangelism.

But we're not always sure how to do it. This call to be a light, this call to do evangelism makes us nervous because we've seen so many people attempt to let their light shine, and they end up making a mess. We go on a trip to New York City, and we make the obligatory trip to Times Square. The place is hopping with tourists from every nation, tribe and language. The billboards flash around us. All the tourists are holding up their cell phones and taking pictures. It's an exciting place, but—and if you've been there you'll know what I mean—there's a feeling of lost-ness too. It's an ironic thing to say about a place that's so full of flashing billboards, but it feels like a place that needs some light. And as you walk across the square there's a guy holding a placard with one word on it: 'Repent!' He's shouting at people about Jesus. "The wages of sin are death! Repent while you still have the chance. Jesus offers you salvation! You need to give your life to him. Repent of your sins!!" The people around either ignore what he's saying, or they laugh at him. And inside of you, even though this man is shouting about your Savior, even though he's proclaiming your Jesus, you feel embarrassed and you wish he would stop, because

whatever his intentions are, you feel like he's making things worse. You don't feel like he's shining any light.

Or maybe someone tries to give you an Evangecube. What's an Evangecube? That's a story from the book we suggested to you for the fall, *The Art of Neighboring*. Jay Pathak, one of the authors of the book, was walking the streets around his neighborhood with his wife Danielle. They were trying to meet more people and build relationships as a way to practice hospitality. As they walked along they ran into a man who he hadn't met before. After a bit of chit-chat, the man asked if he could give Jay's daughter a present. Jay asked what it was. And the man held out something that looked like a Rubik's cube. Only it was called an Evangecube and when you opened up the block it told you the story of Jesus. Jay told the man that he was a pastor and so his kids knew the story and the man went on his way. The man obviously meant well, but Jay said the whole thing felt incredibly awkward. Having a complete stranger giving a strange gift to your children without having any idea what was going on your life? It didn't feel like light and hope, it just felt forced and unnatural. Is this really what he had in mind when he said, "Let your light shine before others?"

In his recent book, David Brooks talks about his move towards Christianity and his increased interest in Jesus. He talks about things that helped him on that journey. Honest friendships. People who listened. People who offered to pray for him. Those people were light. Brooks also talks about some people whose efforts did not help. "*Some Christians crudely sought to win me over as a sort of win for their team, and they were a destructive force.*" I think most of us know where Brooks is coming from. We don't like it when Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses come to our door. And all of this makes us feel unsure about evangelism. We want to be obedient to the call, but we see it being done badly and so we often do nothing.

So what do we do about this situation. First, notice what Jesus actually says in this passage. He says, "let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds, your *kala ergon* (in the Greek), and give glory to your Father in heaven." When Jesus talks about shining light, He doesn't restrict it to words, He uses the broader category of good deeds. Now, deeds can include words, sometimes a good word is a good deed, but certainly Jesus has in mind much more than words when he urges us to shine our light.

As we think about how to shine the light of Jesus in the world, here is something to consider: When you shine your light you want to aim at the shadows. When you shine your light, you want to figure out where the shadows are and you aim your light accordingly. So, you shine your light differently depending on the kind of darkness you're dealing with.

That's how Jesus did it. When Jesus brought the gospel of the kingdom, he didn't have the same approach for every situation. When He preached to Jews in the synagogues, men and women who knew the Bible and its promises, He used straightforward words. 'The Kingdom of heaven has come near. Repent and believe the good news.' When He was dealing with people like the teachers of the law who should know better but who twisted the gospel, He could bring the brimstone: "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees. You hypocrites!" But, when He met with a broken person like Zaccheus or like the Samaritan woman at the well, He could be patient and kind. "Zaccheus, let's have dinner." Jesus saw who was in front of Him and shone the light in the appropriate way with the appropriate intensity. It's the same strategy Paul had when he said "To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all

people to win some.” That doesn’t mean Paul is a flake who tells people what they want to hear, it means that he aims his light at the particular kind of darkness in front of him.

So, in our world what’s the nature of the darkness? We’ve said, multiple times in this series, that two of the darkest shadows in our world are the shadow of loneliness and the shadow of mistrust. We have been lied to so many times by so many people. Every day we get a robocall or an email that’s trying to scam us. Everyday people come up to us pretending to be our friend so they can sell us something. So when a Christian comes up to a secular person and says, ‘I want to share with you the wonderful news of Jesus,’ of course they are met with an eye roll.

In a world where people don’t trust each other, in a world where kindness feels like a sales job, may I suggest that one of the best ways to shine the light of Jesus in this world is to show people Christian hospitality? Hospitality-building genuine relationships, really and honestly getting to know our neighbors, showing them that we care about them and that our care is durable and not momentary—perhaps this is just the right sort of light to penetrate this present darkness. That’s really the main thesis of the *Art of Neighboring*. One of the ideas in the book is that in our society, the Great commandment should be before the Great commission. The great commission says, go make disciples. The great commandment says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. In our society, before we obey the great commandment and tell your neighbor the good news of Jesus, we should probably show our neighbor that we love them, that we care about them. Genuinely care about them. Here’s a quote: “If we live out the Great commandment, an environment is created where the great commission can be effectively obeyed.”

Other societies may be different. I remember talking to a Kenyan friend way back in the 90’s who said that in the part of Kenya where he was from, you could go door to door in your village, knock on someone’s door, say to them ‘I would like to tell you about Jesus,’ and they would invite you in for coffee and listen to you present the gospel. That’s not what happens here. It’s a different sort of darkness that needs a different approach. When we create space to meet our neighbors, when we create occasions where our conversations with them graduate from news, weather and sports to worries, fears and hopes, I promise you faith will come up, the meaning of life will come up, Jesus will come up.

This isn’t just a sensible pattern, it’s a Biblical pattern. Right after Pentecost, the first believers are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit pushes them into a little community of hospitality. They meet at the temple. They meet in each other’s homes. They break bread together with glad and sincere hearts, and Act 2:27 says, “they enjoyed the favor of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily.” There it is. They let the light of their good community shine before others, and the others saw it and they were drawn into the circle of Christ’s love.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century there was an emperor named Julian who wanted to restore worship of the traditional gods to the Roman empire. He hated Christianity and its message. He thought they were ruining the proud heritage of Rome. And do you know what frustrated him the most? Christian hospitality. Christian hospitality struck fear into the heart of the emperor because it was winning so many converts. In an attempt to fight the Christians, he tried to get the traditional Romans to imitate the kindness and neighborliness of the Christians. “Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and

the pretended holiness of their lives that has done the most to increase [their number]?” He ranted further: “It is disgraceful that when those impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.” This Christian hospitality is killing us! There it is again. Great commandment before great commission. Let your light shine before others so that they can see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.

When I started out in ministry, my life intersected with a young man who was known by another Woodlawn family. He wasn't a Christian, and they wanted me to meet with him, to say some clever and winsome things that would make him open up to the gospel. We met for lunch. We had a nice time. I asked him about faith but he said he wasn't interested. He said he had too many friends who used to be addicted to drugs and were now addicted to Jesus and he didn't want that. My words didn't make any headway with him. But I found out he was a softball player and Woodlawn's team needed more players.

I invited him to play with us. He did. He loved it. He was a great teammate and the guys really enjoyed his company. He'd go out with us after the game for beverages—that's slow pitch hospitality. A couple of years of this and he started showing up in church. And pretty soon he was showing up in my office. And pretty soon he was standing up in front of the church making profession of faith. He doesn't live in Grand Rapids anymore, but he's still in the church. There it is again. The great commandment before great commission. Hospitality shining out as gospel light.

People of God, the light of Jesus is in you! Let your light shine before others so they can see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.

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