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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 58:6-10
Matthew 5:16-20

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand-shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:14-16, from “The Message”)

O God, you call us to shine. You call us to be light. You call us to bring your light into the darkness. You call us to share the light. We know, though, God, that we don’t always do this. We hide our light under a bushel. We turn down the lights. We keep silent about your light. Forgive us. And help us. Help us to open up to others, help us to share your light. And help us to shine. Amen.

“Shine”

Last week we began a sermon series I’ve titled “Here’s the Church, Here’s the Steeple, Walk Inside and See all the . . .” Those dots replace the “people” in the poem because, as we heard last week, churches are not filled with people any more. Fewer and fewer people are choosing to come to church. We heard startling statistics about our own denomination and how it’s losing members; and we also looked at our own numbers and where Faith Des Peres stands in all of this. There are a variety of reasons given for why people don’t come to church anymore; so many reasons we won’t be able to cover all of them. But one of the reasons given by the NYT op-ed writer Ross Douthat, which we looked at last week, is that liberal Christianity (a camp we’d probably find ourselves in) no longer has a compelling mission and has accommodated itself so much to the culture, that people no longer see a reason to go.

As I said last week, I take issue with Douthat’s premise that we no longer have a compelling mission. We do have a compelling mission, and that is to share God’s love and the light of Christ with the world, both with our actions our words. Where we’ve gone wrong, I think, is with the latter. We stopped talking about this wonderful God we believe in, a God who seeks the lost, and tends the broken, a God who puts mercy ahead of law, and compassion before custom, and God who forgives sinners and welcomes all people to the table. We stopped talking about this God; we stopped sharing the good news of this God with people we meet and care about.

But other people didn’t stop talking about God; they kept talking; but the God they speak about doesn’t look much like the God I just mentioned, the one I happen to believe in very strongly. The God they speak of, to use the words of Brian McLaren, “loves

Christians but hates Muslims (have we not see the awful consequences of that this week?); pours luxuries on the rich but consigns the poor to poverty; or a God who cares about human souls but doesn't care about conserving and protecting our beautiful, fragile planet." (*Brian McLaren, animate-faith, God: Faith is a Quest*)

Is this the God we want people to believe in? Is this the God the world needs? Have we not seen the devastating, horrible consequences of trumpeting this God to the world this past week with the murders of Americans at our embassy in Libya?

Friends, just because there are people who evangelize really, really badly doesn't mean we shouldn't be doing it at all. Now, more than ever, the world needs to know about the God we believe in. Would you agree? OK. Good. Then let's start talking about God. Let's take God out from under the bushel basket and let God's light shine. Because the world could use less darkness, and more light. Let's start sharing God with the world.

And that's really all evangelism is. Evangelism, as someone wrote, is sharing "**something** we enjoy with someone we like." (*Martha Grace Reese, "Unbinding the Gospel-Real Life Evangelism", 97*) Evangelism is sharing our hope, our faith, and our belief that God is loving and active in the world. Evangelism is not, at least in my opinion, is not strong-arming someone into believing what we believe. There are people who think that's what evangelism is, and perhaps you did, too, before I just listed off other ways of thinking about evangelism. I, personally, do not want to strong arm people because I myself don't want to be strong armed. But I do want people to know about God's love, a love I believe Christ embodied; and I believe that love can make a difference in people's lives because it has made a difference in mine and I can't imagine my life without that love. For me, God's love is the foundation of my life. And it's the reason I can love my family-children and husband without reservation-and love my friends and all of you-even on the days when I don't feel very loving or lovable.

Remember last week I asked all of you to think about how you would answer Jesus if he were to ask you, just like he asked Peter, "who do you say that I am?" Well, if Jesus were to ask me that question, I'd say, "Jesus, I believe you are God's love embodied, because everything you said and did pointed to God's love." It's not the most sophisticated belief in the world, but it's my belief. And when it comes to evangelism, we're not asked to be experts who hawk other people's beliefs, we're asked to invite people with us on this journey we call faith so that others may come to know, experience, and share God's love, too. That's what I believe, and that's what motivates me to evangelize . . .to share my faith.

I've been reading a book the past couple of weeks titled "Unbinding the Gospel, Real Life Evangelism", by Martha Grace Reese. It's written for people like us; people who have a fear of speaking about our faith in public . . .of evangelizing. In the book she asks her readers to imagine they are like a pitcher (not a baseball pitcher, but a pitcher used to pour water). Our pitchers are filled with motivations for sharing our faith. My pitcher, for example, would be filled with God's love. Other peoples' pitchers are filled with the belief that if they if don't evangelize and "save souls", i.e. convert people to Christianity,

people are at risk of going to hell. If someone believes that, that's a big motivation to evangelize; eternal life depends on it.

Since most of us in the mainline churches don't believe that, we need to think long and hard about what our pitchers are filled with. So let's brainstorm this. What might our pitchers contain?

Some people's pitchers are overflowing with social justice. They want to share their faith because they believe passionately that Christ came "for the last of these", and therefore we are called to be Christ's hands and body in the world. My pitcher is filled with some of this.

Some people's pitchers are filled with knowledge and questions; they're eager to learn; they seek new answers to age-old questions; they like to talk about what they're reading and share that information with other people. My pitcher has some of this stuff, too.

Some people's pitchers are filled with prayer. They pray for people; they sense the Spirit at work in prayer; they're open to the movement of the Spirit. These people share their faith in a way that is calming in the midst of a storm. My pitcher could use a little more of this.

I encourage you to think about what is in your pitcher, what motivates you to share your faith.

Of course, pitchers can also be drained, right? Difficult times can drain our pitchers; a loved one's death; a diagnosis; a divorce; losing a job; hearing bad news; shame; anger, hurt; bullying; things like this can drain our pitchers. There are times in our lives when we have little Good News to share, bad headlines surround us.

Which means that those of us with full pitchers need to pour out what we have. Those of us with pitchers filled with God's love, need to share it with those who need it. Those of us with pitchers filled with social justice, need to be the hands of body of Christ to people in need. Those of us who are filled with knowledge, need to share some of it with others; and those of us whose pitchers are filled with prayer, need to share the Spirit's calming presence with those who are riding out one of life's storms.

That, my friends, is evangelism. And I am convinced that there are a whole host of people who need what we have to share. So many.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid."

You are the light of the world.

Isaiah says:

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? 7 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? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

You are the light of the world, Jesus said.

I want to close with a wonderful story that was on NPR's weekend edition a couple of weeks ago. Appropriately titled, "Shine", it seemed to me to capture the essence of letting our light shine perfectly.

The story is about Getnet Marsha, an immigrant from Ethiopia who shines shoes in the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport in Charlotte, N.C. Except he doesn't just shine shoes, he saves them. He gives the shoes in his care such expert, even loving care that they come alive under his touch. More than that, he gives a moment of respite to those who come his way. Knowing this may be one of the few moments of the day when his patrons have a break, he tries to make the most of it.

Getnet, who goes by Getu, doesn't make a lot of money from his trade. Because he is a refugee, he is tremendously grateful for this opportunity to earn enough to live on and, by being careful, to send some money back home to his family. But even more, he is grateful for the chance to make a difference. He believes that his efforts, no matter how small they may seem, change, if not the world, at least a small part of the world of those who venture into Concourse D of Charlotte's airport.

And is this not the essence of evangelism: to share what we enjoy with people we like, so that they, too, may know the joy God brings and experience God's love? Is it not sharing our hope, our faith, and our belief that God is loving and active in the world?

You are the light of the world, Jesus said. You are the light of the world.
Friends, the world needs more light, and less darkness.
And you have it to share.

This week I want you to meditate on two questions:
How is God calling you to shine?
And where is God calling you to shine?

Amen.