

Shine

Matthew 5:13-16

From the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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Matt Matthews

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, “People have an idea that the preacher is an actor on a stage and they [the congregation] are the audience. What they don't know is that they are the actors on the stage; and the preacher is merely the prompter standing in the wings, reminding them of their lost lines.”

This is known as Kierkegaard's great theatre of worship. We sometimes say the preacher is the star actor and the crowd is the “audience.” Not so. The preacher is not the main actor, at all. The preacher is the encourager. The preacher wants to help you, the congregation, do your best because you, the congregation, are the main actor.

And the audience? The audience is GOD.

Kierkegaard's theatre of worship.

When we leave worship, I'm often privy to the conversations folk have about it. I sometimes hear, through the grapevine, at least, that “the choir was off today. The preacher was confusing, or uninspiring, or flat. The musician played the hymns too slowly, too quickly, too quietly, too loudly. (Richard, it's all *your* fault!).

But how often do we measure/evaluate our own performance not somebody else's? *I really prayed hard today. I sang my heart out to God today. I listened to and chewed on the scripture today like a hungry man, like a woman hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I renewed my baptismal vows today. I let the waters of baptism wash away the sins of my past, and I'm beyond eager to step out in faith in new ways—with God's help. I've put on new, clean clothes, work gloves. I'm crowning everything with humility and love. I am the modern day Micah: seeking justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God. I was still. I listened to the Spirit's whisper. I emptied myself. I put on my thinking cap.*

God is the audience. The congregation are the main actors. The choir, worship leaders, and preacher are the prompters of lost lines.

Insofar as Kierkegaard prompts me that “The preacher is the prompter of lost lines,” allow me to prompt you. Let me simply remind you of what you already know. As you step out onto the stage of worship and of life, let me remind you of these familiar lines from Jesus' sermon on the mount:

Be salty.

Shine.

* * *

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus says, so, be salty.

Let your good works (*your light*) shine so that others can see God shine through you.

These two statements are another way that Jesus is saying not only should we talk the talk and walk the walk.

Be salty. Get into life so that you can spice it up. Put your lamp on the lamp stand, not under a bushel.

* * *

Two weeks ago I joined my study group of 25 years. The five of us men pray together, eat together, study together, weep together, talk manly talk together, ask questions of each other and of ancient texts, and talk about the practice and art of ministry. We met years ago at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

My friend Feild Russell (who worshipped here with us some months ago) shared two stories about this text from Matthew's gospel.

Decades ago, a high official made a state tour to Poland. On Sunday, she was accompanied by a secret police guard to attend mass. She asked her guard, "Are you a catholic?"

He said, "I believe but don't practice."

She asked, "Are you a communist?"

He said, "I practice but I don't believe."

Faith and practice must come together for either to be authentic. Jesus wants to know, *Who lights their lamp and puts it under a bushel?* The lamp needs to be placed on the lampstand. The salt needs to be stirred into the stew. Faith and works must come together.

And this story. Feild can't remember where he got the story, so could not verify that it is actually true, but it certainly works as a telling parable: A professor gives an end-of-term exam on the Immanuel Kant's Moral Imperative. The exam consists of two hours of writing, a break, two more hours of writing.

All failed the exam. The professor told his class: I was outside the room and I watched you in the hallway during your break. You failed to say one word of comfort to the elderly man sitting on the floor who was in obvious need. You used the rest room. You milled around talking with yourselves. You gazed out the windows. But you refused to say one word of comfort to the elderly man sitting on the floor who obviously needed help. You failed, in practice, at being a moral human being. And so, you've failed my theoretical exam, which is way less important.

Maybe it wasn't a fair exam. I would have immediately complained to the dean about this trick exam. A professor has every right to grade me, but never to judge me. But the point certainly

works for this sermon: What we believe and what we do must come together. Our worship and walk need to line up. Do we place our lamp for the world to see, or do we put it under a bushel?

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Some of you have expressed interest in going to Cuba with us as walk the talk of building a partnership between Havana's Luyano and Champaign's First Presbyterian churches. Join us.

If you come, you'll meet Yaimi. She is an elder in the church who welcomed us into her church, her home, and her heart.

Last year, I sat in on Yaimi's children's Sunday school class. She taught the class in Spanish, of course. I did my very best to understand, but was mostly lost. When Yaimi stood and ended the class with a little speech, though, I recognized the first two words, which she repeated to the children: "*practicar compassion.*"

There it is: preaching compassion, thinking compassion, studying compassion is good, but it matters little if we don't practice it. "Practicar compassion."

So, spice up the world by being active in it. Show up. Contribute, for you are the salt of the earth.

And remember: there are people in this broken, aching, beautiful, redeemed, needy, complicated world waiting in darkness for the light that God has set ablaze uniquely in you.

Bring it. Let it shine.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.

Matthew 5:13-16 ¹³You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.