

“The Light of the World”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
February 9, 2014 Ordinary 5A (Annual Meeting)

Isaiah 58:1-12 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 Matthew 5:14-16

Once again this week I am amazed and moved by the hospitality and love that has been shining through this church. You supported Maurice through the difficult last weeks and months of his wife Pamela’s life, and hosted a gracious funeral for her last Sunday afternoon. People were touched, not only by the service and the words of her daughters, but also by the warm welcome everyone received from this congregation.

And then, when tragedy struck in the same week, once again you responded immediately, as you did last fall when Andri died suddenly. This time it was Harriette and Ruthie Townsend who died tragically as their house burned to the ground. Jack of course was on the scene as a firefighter, trying to put out the blaze. But we also saw a picture of him in the paper, comforting one of the family members. And Karen also showed up soon after Jack, not knowing whose house it was, but with an armful of coats for anyone who might need them that freezing morning. Later, many of you provided clothing, food, money and love to the family, as they not only lost two loved ones, but also everything they owned. One of the relatives wrote to me and said, “I want to say how amazingly supportive the church community, as well as the town, has been. It really restores one’s faith in humanity to see how freely people have opened their hearts to the Coleman family...” You opened your hearts and the light of God shined through.

We read Jesus’ words in the gospel of Matthew this morning: “You are the light of the world...” Our light was shining brightly in a very dark place for the last week and a half. And I’m proud of this church.

We had a different kind of challenge a few weeks before when the Children of Uganda came to town. Some of you were nervous and shy about hosting Ugandan strangers. OK, some of you worked yourselves into an anxious frenzy about it. But you did it. Seven of our families each welcomed three or four guests into their hearts and homes. Many of you collected clothing and bought them boots, and the rest of you cooked and opened the church for a potluck. And you did all of this with joy. You put yourselves out on the line, and again, God’s light shined through.

But here’s a question: do we have to wait for a big event or a tragedy to let our light shine? Can it shine even when things are going along easily? There is something about challenging times that calls out the best in us. When faced with an unusual circumstance, we do our best to help each other, to comfort each other, to let others know we care. And you don’t have to look far to find people in need. There is more need for God’s light than any of us can ever meet. Still, we do our best, and God’s lights shines through, as you can read in our annual report, of all the activities we do during the year.

Every week day in the fireplace room, you will find volunteers teaching English Conversation Classes, helping people who are new to this part of the world find their voices and be heard. Every Sunday night you can find Youth Group teenagers meeting here to discuss issues that are important to them and find support. Every other Monday at the Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen, you will find some of our people providing a warm meal and welcome to people who have trouble making ends meet. Many of these people

struggle with chronic mental illness, and this is a place they can come to, where they don't feel alone in the world. Our church owns and maintains the Oelhaf House, a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Having a safe place to live reminds these women and children that they are valuable human beings who deserve to live free from violence. Community of Friends in Action (or CoFiA) meets here every month planning ways to help immigrant day laborers who are treated as subhuman by some people, or cheated out of their wages. CoFiA offers them hospitality, tells them what their rights are, and helps them stand up for themselves. Every week our church donates food to the Center for Food Action. Two weeks a year we provide meals and overnight supervision with the Family Promise shelter. And in the summer we help build houses with Habitat for Humanity. Last summer five of us traveled to Guatemala to help build school rooms with an organization called "Hug It Forward", and we hope to send more people this summer. And we support many other missions with our money and our prayers.

We do a lot for such a small congregation. But there is always a need for compassion and light in this world. And sometimes there are needs even where things seem to be going well.

This week Philip Wilson sent me an amusing poem by Stephen Dunn from the New Yorker magazine. It's called "Ambush At five O'clock." It's too long for me to read it to you, but in it, two middle-aged couples are talking casually, when one husband asks the other couple, smiling, about their souls. The couple laughs and throws the question back to the husband, who also jokes and avoids answering. But his wife takes the question seriously. She says her soul suffers from neglect, and then she begins to cry. The husband, who brought up the question of their souls to start with, is clueless. The poem ends with the other woman comforting the wife with an understanding embrace, while the husband says, What about me? Why doesn't her husband comfort me with a knowing nod and a beer?

The poem has a humorous tone, but it's true that people do neglect their souls. And we need to be ready with a word of hope or a gesture of care, to shine God's light when someone suddenly realizes something is missing and feels a need for compassion and light in their lives. Not everyone needs food and clothing. But almost everyone could use a sympathetic ear, a little kindness and understanding, and maybe a gentle invitation to consider faith. We don't have to wait for a tragedy to shine the light of God in the world. There are opportunities everywhere.

Hwan Hee read from 1 Corinthians today. Paul wrote that he came to the Corinthians in weakness and in fear and in much trembling (vs. 3). Maybe that's the best way to shine God's light: realize how vulnerable we all are, all the time. But also to take the risk, and see what God can do. Paul went on to say, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

I have no idea what God is preparing for this church in the coming year. But if we open our hearts, if we give our all in fear and in trembling, I know God will do great things. Thank you for letting God's light shine through you. Amen.