

“The Light of True Wisdom”

Matthew 5:13-16; I Corinthians 1:26—2:5 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – February 5, 2023

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the bearing of these words, that we might open our hearts
to your wisdom and trust in your strength. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Apparently, Jesus is going to get introduced during the Super Bowl next weekend. I know, I know, you're shocked that I know when the Super Bowl is, but don't worry; it didn't stop us from scheduling an Elders meeting! But seriously, there's going to be an ad aiming to re-brand Jesus during the game. It's part of a broader “He Gets Us” campaign that's been running ads for the past 10 months. When a friend posted about this upcoming ad on Facebook last week, the first thing it made me think of was the church near where I served in Alabama, whose voicemail greeting declared that they were “a place dedicated to making Jesus famous.” I never quite got that one either. There's nothing that I recall in any of the gospels implying that Jesus was interested in becoming famous.

I think part of the problem that these and similar marketing campaigns are reacting to is that, in some senses, Jesus is currently infamous, rather than famous. Surveys have shown that a wide swath of Americans associate churches with hatred and intolerance, rather than love and compassion. It seems we've had a plenty tall lampstand. The problem is that it wasn't the light of Christ that was shining out from those lamps.

Now, it is highly unlikely that VLM is ever going to purchase ad-time during the Super Bowl. We have better things to spend \$20 million dollars on, should they come our way. But that doesn't mean this isn't an issue we should think about. Indeed, during this anniversary year, one of our hopes is to spend time discerning who we are and how to share that more broadly, so that the people who need to be part of this community can find their way here. As we do that, we need to keep in mind the lessons of both of our scripture passages today, and the delicate balance between them.

Jesus wants us to know that we are the light of the world. Jesus wants us to let our lights shine, so that others may see our works and give glory to God. And I think it's only honest to admit that we have some trouble doing this. We were raised to be modest, unassuming, some of us deferential to a fault. We've watched other Christians be what we would call "pushy" and we know deep in our souls that's not what God wants from us. Our aversion to that sort of behavior, though, has overgrown its usefulness and made us keep our mouths shut when we shouldn't have. We haven't seen others models for shining our lights, so we've assumed that the rules about bushel baskets must have changed. We haven't figured out how to do it appropriately, so we've just given up trying. But if we want to bring light and hope and love into people's lives, Jesus is telling us that the bushel baskets are still not helping. We've got to find a way to share the good news we're living here together, with those who haven't experienced it yet.

Paul, on the other hand, is cautioning against the dangers of getting too caught up in delivering the message in ways that people find appealing. He knows that, far too often, among humans, the message gets swallowed up by the messenger. The charismatic leader, the catchy music, the endorphins of being in a high-energy crowd – the noise of all that can drown out the quiet, humble call of the gospel. Our attempts to make Jesus appealing, popular, famous even, tend to turn him into something other than who he is.

Now it may sound like I've spelled out a simple dichotomy here, but it's anything but simple. Balancing these two concerns is one of the biggest struggles the church has had over the centuries of its existence. And each denomination and each congregation is going to find its own place along the spectrum. I would argue that for churches like ours, the key is relationship. A Super Bowl ad is way beyond our budget, but that's not really a problem, because a Super Bowl ad doesn't involve relationship. People are going to wander in our doors, not because of an ad campaign, but because someone who's already here demonstrated that they care about them and that what happens here is the source and motivation of that care.

Small church ministry invites us to shine our lights through the power of connection. But as Paul cautions, the first relationship we need to attend to, in order to make this work, is our own relationship with God. We may have talents and gifts and even wisdom, but unless we get ourselves out of the way, bringing someone in through the power of relationship will only bear fruit if they end up connecting to

God and not just us. Human relationships are notoriously fragile, especially in these times of polarization and cultural division. If that's what someone's commitment relies on, it will always be in danger of crumbling. We need to be sure that the light we are sharing is the light of Christ, the light of God's love that transcends our own personalities and peculiarities. We can only ensure this remains the case if we stay in constant communion with God. It's why we return to worship each week. It's why we study scripture. It's why we pray prayers of confession and petition, prodding ourselves to admit just how needy we really are, we who pride ourselves on self-sufficiency.

Is it ironic that Paul boasts of his weakness and lack of wisdom? Sure. Ironic but necessarily. This is real talk from someone who used to occupy a position of privilege. Paul had to set aside his own shininess in order to share the light of Christ, and he shared the story of that process with the church folks in Corinth because they, too, were surrounded by shiny things, just as we are. If we are going to share the true light of Christ, the light of true wisdom with others, we need to continually seek it out and discern its presence for ourselves. We need to hone our skills of honesty and humble forthrightness, so that they are able to withstand the power of our skills of denial and rationalization. We are gifted at explaining to ourselves why the thing we most want is obviously what God wants for us too, whether it matches up with gospel values or not. We are gifted at convincing ourselves that the easy way is the grace of God pouring into our lives, when in fact, it may be our own fear directing us.

This is why we come back here every week. Not just to see one another and laugh and weep together. But to commune with the Holy, the One who lifts us out of our everyday perspective, so that we can see more clearly what is true and good and wise, instead of just what is shiny and appealing and undisturbing. Shining our lights is supposed to bring glory to God, not just people to sit beside us in church. If we do it well, it might do both. Or it might not. Faithfulness does not require a lampstand the size of a Super Bowl ad. But however we do it, what Paul wants us to realize is that shining our own lights, on our own power, is not illumination that will last. We are vessels, not the Source. We are weak and foolish, but also beloved and precious. And our weak and foolish world can know itself beloved and precious if we can reflect the light of God's love in ways that are authentic and true. And that will bring true glory to God! Hallelujah and Amen!