

The Light from the Cliff

Matthew 5:13-20

Lake Superior is known as the most dangerous body of water in the world, particularly in November when vicious storms have sunk more than 350 ships, including the infamous Edmund Fitzgerald, whose 29 crewmen have never been found. The watery waves of the lake during the tempestuous November storms feel particularly maelstrom-like to sailors in the pitch black of night on the Great Lakes. They could neither navigate nor see through the thick darkness. As waves rose high above the ships and tossed them to and fro, all they could do is pray to survive.

In 1905, a particularly fierce Canadian Northwestern storm swept across Lake Superior. The “storm of the century” wiped out 29 ships alone, leaving death and destruction in its wake. At that point, Split Rock Lighthouse was commissioned on a cliff near Beaver Bay, Minnesota.

The lighthouse was completed in 1910 sporting a huge Fresnel clam shell lens containing 242 prisms and rotates. Its blindingly bright, flashing, white beam could be seen for 22 miles, illuminating the entire landscape, town, cliff, and sea. Built upon a cliff, the light became a beacon of hope to all who dared cross the dangerous waves of the Great Lakes. The Split Rock Light has since saved thousands of lives. The “saving” nature of the “light” best describes Jesus’ metaphor, as he addressed his disciples, teaching them about what it meant to be a “light to the world.”

In Jesus’ scripture for today, he uses several metaphors to describe what it means to be a follower, a member of God’s present and active kingdom in the world. One of those is a brilliantly bright light:

A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.

But the light in Jesus’ metaphor comes not from one’s own sense of self or from an external or physical source, but from the glow of God illuminating the spirit from within. When Jesus lives in your heart, your face shines, everything you say and do feels warm and inviting. Just as Moses’ face shone when he came down from the mountain after communing with God, so do our faces shine when we allow God to illuminate our innermost souls.

Jesus’ presence in our lives and hearts is something like installing a high-powered lens in the flesh of our hearts. That lens not only warms our hearts and softens our spirits, but it infuses us with such love and caring for others that we can’t help but show it in all we say and do. Because the Light lives within us, we become a vehicle for the Light, which shines into the world with a powerful force, letting everyone who encounters it know the saving presence and grace of Jesus, Messiah, and Son of God.

The light of God is not only an illuminating light; it’s a saving light. It’s meant to save others from the darkness in which they dwell, to give hope to the lost and enlightenment to the confused.

Too often in our world, we take Jesus’ words and simply try to emulate his message in a physical, political, or economic platform. Jesus’ disciples often did the same. For them, it was extremely hard to separate the illuminating, spectacular beauty of the Jerusalem Temple as their symbol of light and hope from the Light that Jesus was describing—a light that comes from God reflected in the hearts of followers. After all, the joy of the Temple’s restoration marks the entire meaning of Hanukkah—the restoration and relighting of the Temple’s oil-lit lamps after the Maccabean revolts! The Temple had always been a symbol for illumination and identity. But Jesus meant so much more.

In 1630, preacher John Winthrop described his excitement for the proposed, new Massachusetts Bay Colony in a sermon he wrote on the ship’s journey to the new land. He hoped the new colony would be a “city on a hill,”

that it would differ from the rest of the world in its call to walk in the way of God as the prophet Micah suggested, to develop an inclusive, loving kind of alternative community. Since then, many subsequent political figures have usurped the phrase “city on a hill” to describe US America as a beacon to others. But Jesus’ original intent had nothing to do with a physical city, not Jerusalem, and definitely not a country.

For Christ is the Light. Christ Temple is not physical but spiritual. We are the living stones built upon Christ cornerstone. And Christ provides the Light.

In a sense, we all fit together in a spiritual community that we build upon the foundation of Jesus’ life, sacrifice, and teachings. But just as in the metaphor of Split Rock Lighthouse, the true value is not in the building itself but in the Light.

In the Book of Revelation, the angel provides a vision of the City of God, descending from the heavens onto a high cliff-like mountain, illuminated entirely not on its own but by the light of God. The entire landscape, city, and those within it are lit by God’s holy, energizing, healing, redeeming Light.

This is the kind of Light Jesus wants us to understand. It’s not simply that we go about doing good things, although good things are always good. It’s not merely that we worship Jesus and proclaim his Light to others through our words and sermons.

We are called to allow Jesus access to our very hearts. To allow him to infuse us with a warmth, a light, a fire, an energy, a brightness and hope so bright and encompassing that we can’t help but glow in its wake.

When others look at someone infused with the love and saving power of Christ, they may not put their finger on it, but they can tell something is different about that person. People like that glow with a kind of radiance that makes people want to be around them. They radiate joy, peace, love, kindness, all the fruits of the spirit in a way that cannot be contrived.

But to do this, you need to open your heart to Christ. You need to stand before Christ in all of your “naked” vulnerability and allow Christ to turn your heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10).

Today, as you Sacrament of Holy Communion, I ask you to say out loud or to yourself: “Holy One, infuse my life with your power and light, that I may illuminate your saving grace to all I encounter this day and always.”