

Illuminating Jesus

Matthew 5:13-20

The art of stained glass goes back many years to about 2700 BCE when Mesopotamians and ancient Egyptians began creating colored beads of glass, primarily for jewelry. By the 1st century, the Romans began using colored glass for windows. But stained-glass windows reached their height in Medieval Europe when they were used to create the massive, exquisite, and intricate glass windows you see on European Gothic Cathedrals and Abbeys.

These windows, featuring depictions of Christian symbols, stories, and characters became known as the “poor man’s Bible,” because they taught those who either couldn’t or weren’t permitted to read the scriptures through images and story.

When you look at our stained-glass windows at night or on a cloudy day, you cannot see much except dark colored glass. It’s only when either the sun is shining through the glass or a light is fixed behind the glass that the images emerge in all their beauty and glory! Light is the “secret ingredient” for revealing the beauty and biblical stories harbored within the glass.

In Jesus day, the Jerusalem Temple was known as the pride of the Jewish people. Standing on mount Zion, its massive structure could be seen for miles. Within the Court of the Women stood four 7 Ft. high golden menorahs, oil lamps that were bright enough to illuminate the entire city. These were often compared to the pillar of fire, God’s presence, that led the Israelites through the wilderness. This illumination of the Temple, this public visibility, represented for the Jewish people God as the “Light of the Universe.” Called the “Herodian Lamps,” during the Feast of Tabernacles, these would be lit, celebrating God’s eternal presence.

The Temple therefore represented a “beacon” of holiness and symbol of endurance and blessing upon the Jewish people for all to see. The light also helped others to see the “House of God.”

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jewish people would build little “huts” to dwell in to celebrate and invite God’s presence, just as in the wilderness, the Israelites carried a Tabernacle to “house” the Spirit of God. Jesus however would offer a new and different idea about how to think about God, the Temple, and God’s Truth!

In John 8:12, Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life." Now in Matthew 5:14, he says

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it 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 God in heaven.”

Here, Jesus teaches that we need to function as those powerful Lampstands, so that as disciples the Truth of Christ may be illuminated through all of us. In this way, others can view the Truth and Presence of God within a dark, lonely, and worrisome world.

Our job as disciples is to help people see Christ's light and hope within their lives and within the world. That light can help lift them from dark places, light their path forward, and help them to see that Jesus is by their side no matter what they are going through.

For Jesus, "righteousness" is not accomplished by simply following laws and going through the motions of religious ritual. True righteousness is seen through actions that reflect the glory of Christ and that point to God's love and blessings upon all of God's people.

Jesus is adamant that his disciples do not hide from their responsibility to serve as beacons of his promise to the world. They are in a sense taking on a role as those who "point toward the holy!" Those whose spirits shine so brightly with the love of God that they brighten every space and illuminate the Image and Story of God's plan for humanity.

The disciple's role is not simply one of shining a spotlight, however. Their very souls must also shine with the presence of Christ within. Their character and identity illuminate the Truth of Christ in all that they do.

This is why Medieval artists so often paint light in the form of a "halo" around the persons or heads of those designated as apostles, saints, and martyrs of the church. They did not just point to the Truth. They lived the Truth within them.

For Jesus, spiritual transformation was the necessary step in one's call to be light within a darkened world.

Not only do we require light to see the Image of Christ and the stories and saints who came before us in beautiful stain glass windows, but those lights shine most beautifully within surrounding darkness! The darker the surroundings, the more vivid and striking is the Light and Colors of those exquisite portraits of Truth.

In the same way, the Light of Christ we carry within us can be seen most vividly by those whose lives feel bleak and dark.

You can light a candle in the daylight, and though you see it, it's not as striking as if you light a candle in a completely darkened room. In that moment, when the darkness becomes illuminated, and you can begin to see, you understand the power of light.

Perhaps this is why Jesus' message resounds so resonantly with those who dwell in the shadows, whether from illness or abuse or fear or despair.

When the light of Christ appears in their lives through you or someone else and illuminates the truth of God's care and love, perhaps for the very first time, you allow someone to "see."

As Jesus says, do not be sparing in showing the Light of Christ within you. Be that light of Truth and Love, Hope and Peace, Comfort and Presence, Illumination and Living Color that is the Person of Christ. Allow people to see Christ's transformational power and gift of Life and all that can be possible when Christ enters our world. Jesus will take it from there!

May your life be a living Story of God's grace and Truth.