

*Let It Shine*

Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” As Lutherans, it’s obligatory for us to point out that good works do not earn salvation. We are justified by grace through faith. We don’t have to do anything to be God’s child. It’s all God’s doing.

If there is any light within us, it wasn’t born in us. We are creatures, not the Creator. The divine image in us has been marred by sin. If there is any light in us we didn’t create it ourselves either. We don’t have the power to do that. We can’t choose to be good on our own. If there is any light in us, it can only come from God. God shares his light with us. We reflect the light of the Lord.

Implicit in Jesus’ statement is the idea that faith will naturally express itself in good works. Faith saves us, and our faith motivates and inspires us to do good things for others and for us to lead wholesome, holy lives. We cannot choose to be saved, God does that for us. But we do have free will over every other area of our life. We chose how we live; we chose what we do and don’t do. We are responsible for our actions, good or bad.

St. James says that, “Faith without works is dead.” And Jesus said that, “By their fruits you will know them.” A faithful person will live a good, honorable life and do good things for others.” A person full of faith just can’t help doing good. When we have faith our light shines. Sometimes,

though, we need some encouragement to let our lights shine. Perhaps we fear that our lights aren't as bright as some others, or that no one cares for our light, or shining our light will take us places we don't want to go. So we hide our light. Jesus encourages us to be bold and do what we are called to do -- let our light shine!

But what good is doing good anyway? Why bother loving and serving others? If I'm saved, why should I worry about anybody else? This is because the primary mission of the church is the proclamation of the gospel. We aren't an educational institution, or a social service agency, or any kind of for-profit corporation. Our #1 goal is to share the good news of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. All else that we do flows out of that. We let our light shine for Jesus' sake. We love and serve others to give God glory, and so that others may be drawn into the glorious relationship with Christ that we have. Faith overflows into loving action.

How do we let our lights shine? The primary way that Christians show their love of Christ and their neighbors is through personal, individual, often what we might call indirect, or even unintentional, acts of caring. What do I mean by that? Parents being good parents is an act of love and service. Doing your job honestly and well is shining your light. Being a good citizen is a good work. We should not look down on the ordinary Christian who lives out his or her faith in the actions of everyday life. The child in school, the teacher in the classroom, and the custodian cleaning up, are all equally living out their faith in their own way and doing God's work, as much as any pastor, theologian, or social service provider.

While it is true that individual Christians living out their lives is the primary way we serve our Lord and His people, it is also true that it is a good thing for us to band together to love and serve others in ways that we cannot do alone. There is a place for corporate ministry to the needy in the life of the church. That is a valid expression of our faith. We can do more together than by ourselves. But there are some things we need to consider.

The scriptures and the Confessions do not mandate any particular ways that the church has to serve. They don't specifically demand that we build daycare centers or nursing homes or have a food pantry or whatever. The needs of different communities will be different and we need to be flexible in our approach. Yet, at the same time, we need to be careful to not let the world set our agenda.

Social concerns can easily take over the life of the church, and our true mission becomes obscured. As we said, the church's primary function is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, not engaging in political advocacy or creating social ministry corporations, although they might have their place. How we care for others is always an expression of Christ's love and care, and it creates an opportunity for us to share the gospel with people in crisis. Whether that care is food for a family in Monroeville or aid to refugees in Haiti, the motivation and purpose are the same, to glorify God and bring others to Him.

It is also true, of course, the church doesn't have the resources to address every human need. I can't tell you how many people from our neighborhood approached me in December looking for help with food and utility bills and

Christmas gifts for their children and things, and there just weren't enough funds to go around. Still, Lutherans in Southwestern have a proud history of providing for those in need, going back to Pastor William Passavant in the nineteenth century. We have Lutheran Senior Life for the elderly, and Glade Run for at risk children, and many more ministries. We can even join in with other religious and secular groups to provide assistance to others when doing so doesn't compromise our doctrinal integrity. Last year we supported ministries like the Christian Appalachian Project and Voice of the Martyrs.

God had blessed us to be salt and light. Lovingly, generously caring for others is one way we express our faith. It's what we naturally do. The church can be a force for good in society, and the best gift we can offer others is Christ himself. So let your light shine. Amen