

“From Darkness Into Light” **First Presbyterian Church**
Pastor Dave Carlson
March 26, 2017

Old Testament lesson: Genesis 1:1-4

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 5:8-14

At the church conference I attended last week, the keynote speaker presented her findings on those who call themselves spiritual but not religious. These are people you encounter everyday. Their sense of spirituality is important to them, but they don't associate it with any religion or going to church.

Quite the opposite. They see all institutions as “tainted by wrong values and self-interest and have trouble finding ones that mesh with their spiritual beliefs. They resist religious enclosures,” according to Prof. Linda Mercandate, who did the research,¹ interviewing hundreds of people.

They resist religious enclosures. Well, I can understand that. Who likes enclosures!?! Sounds like jail. So the challenge for us as the church is to show our friends who are spiritual but not religious that church is not an enclosure they need to fit into, but rather an expansive space where they can broaden their spiritual horizons and go deeper in their spiritual insights. But just how do we do help them to see that? That's the challenge.

The church has so much baggage in the minds of those who don't really know us. And truth be told, we do have our share of baggage as the church, as a religious institution. But that should not overshadow the spiritual touch-points and Christ-like wisdom available to us and others. So what do we do about it? How do we shed light on all that is good about the church and what a joy and comfort it is to be a part of a community of faith?

The answer is, we stay true to the gospel. And when we're not – when we fall short of what the Bible teaches – we admit that, to ourselves and to others, so that they can see the light of Christ shining through. “For once you were darkness,” says Ephesians, “but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” “Once you were darkness ... but now you are light.” I think of that like springtime.

When you go outside today, look at all the trees that have been in the darkness of winter and how now, in the light of spring, they're beginning to show their true color. The redbud trees are tipped with – well – red buds, the dogwoods are blooming white, the grass is greening, and soon the mighty oaks and ash trees will reveal their true glory.

¹ Linda Mercandate, keynote address, NEXT Church national gathering, Kansas City, MO, March 13, 2017.

It's the same for us. We have seasons of darkness when people don't see the light of our inner being. Sometimes, those seasons last an instant, when we say the wrong thing. At those times, we can shine light into that moment by apologizing, and poof, darkness turns to light.

Other times, our seasons of darkness last longer. They take on a life of their own and become harder to overcome. But that's the beauty of the gospel – if we admit to ourselves that we're in a season of darkness apart from who God is calling us to be, we have the certainty in Christ that a new day will dawn as we move into the light.

In Our New Testament lesson for today, Ephesians tells us how to move into the light. It takes just three steps forward. That's it. Just three steps from darkness into light.

First, Ephesians says, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." "The fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true," so "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." That's step one. How do we find out what is pleasing to the Lord? ...Anyone?

That's right, by looking to God's word and what it says about living a good and faithful life. While many people who don't go to church – and some who do – see church as a place of rules and doctrines designed to control people – like an enclosure – we who are in the light of Christ know in our heart of hearts that church guides us into the light of Christ and helps us stay there.

That's what we need to show with those who are spiritual but not religious. Not that they need church or the church needs them, but that church is where we and all people can become our best selves, OR, where we can boldly and quickly clear it up when we're not. And then the rest is up to God. God will continue to water that seed of faith we've planted – that you have planted – and if the soil is fertile and accepting, it will take root and blossom.

So the first step is to find out what is pleasing to God. The second step, says Ephesians, is to "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." This means that when we've been shown what is right and good, we steer clear of what's wrong and bad. This is easier said than done in a world where lies masquerade as the truth and darkness passes for light.

Take for example these common product slogans and the truth they're designed to hide. When the label screams NEW in all capital letters what it really means, they changed the color from the old one.

ALL NEW? That means, "Not compatible with the one you bought last month."

UNMATCHED – It means it's almost as good as the competition.

FOOLPROOF OPERATION – What you see is what you get, don't be fooled.

ADVANCED DESIGN – Means even the ad agency doesn't understand this product. IT'S HERE AT LAST – Rush job. Nobody knew it was coming. FIELD TESTED – That means, "You try it first; we didn't bother."

FUTURISTIC – Looks funny.

REDESIGNED – That means, “Previous flaws fixed ... we hope.”

YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT – We finally got it to work.

BREAKTHROUGH – We finally figured a use for it.

MAINTENANCE FREE – Impossible to fix.

HIGH RELIABILITY – We made it work just long enough to ship it. NON-

REFUNDABLE – We couldn't make it work long enough to ship it. And finally,

FAT FREE – You pay for the food, but the fat is free.

Deception is all around us. The complexities of life push us to our limits. We easily fall into bad habits and get stuck there. Basically, we take our eye off God and find ourselves lost in darkness, despair, disinterest, or worse yet, defiance. It happens, to us and to others. And when it does happen, Ephesians tells us how to step toward the light, saying, “Take no part in ... unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

The third step is to shed light on the darkness, to say what's what. The truth matters. When you are in a place of darkness, admit that to yourself, and clean it up with those who it affects, or at least tell it to someone who can guide you toward acting better, being more who God created you to be.

And when it is someone else who is in spiritual darkness, help to shed light on that, too. Can you imagine doing that—shedding light on someone else's spiritual darkness?

That is the hardest of the three steps to take. Learning and know what's right – that's easy, refraining from doing wrong – that's a bit harder. But actually admitting it when it's you who have strayed from the path, few people do that. – but then to help others when it's they who are living in darkness and missing out on the light of Jesus—that's the hardest of all.

And yet, that hardest part, when done well, makes admitting and correcting our own failings even easier. Think about those people who are spiritual but not religious. What's the best way to reach them – telling them how wrong they are? No. That just pushes them further away.

How about telling them how right you are – how right we are – that because we go to church, we have it better than they do and so they should come and have the good life, too.

The problem with that is they already have a good life, and they don't have to get up early on Sunday mornings. People who are spiritual but not religious are not miserable people. They're just people. Just like you and me.

The best way for us to show them what they are missing out on is to show them what it's like to live out the truth and wisdom and blessings of the gospel, in our lives.

The best way to do that is to get real with them. To stand alongside them in a shared appreciation for their spiritual journey and ours, and to open up about how God has challenged us to be better than we know ourselves to be.

There is no better place – no safer place – to grow spiritually than the community of faith. It is here, in the church – by us being the church, living out the gospel – that we find and share the grace and mercy and light of the Lord. And all of it, to God's glory, not ours.

You know someone who is spiritual but not religious. That person has his or her reasons – they have their reasons, good reasons. If you are seriously interested in their spiritual journey, ask them about it. And then share with them how your faith community has helped to shine light on your spiritual journey, trusting in God to move us all from darkness into light. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord God, you know the darkness of this world, better than any of us. In Jesus Christ, you entered into that darkness to bring us into the light.

Awaken us, we pray, to the dawning of a new day. Open our eyes that we might see the glories of your world in the blossoming plants all around us, in the twinkling of the stars on a cloudless night, the warmth of the sun on an early spring day.

Let the wonders of your world brighten our spirits and bring joy to our hearts.

As we marvel at your grandeur, we pray for those whose lives are filled with pain and who can see no cause for gratitude. May they feel comforted by your healing presence.

We pray for all those who are struggling with illness and disease.

And for us, Lord, keep our eyes open to the needs of others, that your light might shine brightly as we strive to follow in the footsteps of the giver of light, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**