

"LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

There are different ways to motivate people. And with the Super Bowl now behind us, it won't be long before we're into another baseball season. And here's a story that will help to launch today's sermon.

Don Sutton, a pitcher for the LA Dodgers, hadn't won a game in eight weeks. The press was getting on to him and some were suggesting he be dropped from the starting rotation. Things were looking rather bleak for Sutton and he, himself, was feeling down...terrible. One day before a game, Manager Walt Alston tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Don...I'd like to have a talk with you." And with that, Don Sutton prepared himself for the worst. This was it!

Taking him to one side, Walter Alston said,

"Don....I know how the past couple of months have been for you. Everyone's wondering whether we can make it to the playoffs....you know there's a lot of pressure. I've had to make a decision...a tough one."

Sutton had visions of being taken off the mound and being sent to the bull pen. Alston continued,

"If the Dodgers are going to win this year", he said, looking Sutton in the eye, "they're going to win with Don Sutton pitching. Come what may...you're staying in the starting job. That's all I wanted to say."

Sutton's losing streak lasted two more weeks, but because of his manager's encouragement he felt different about it. Something in him was turning around. He found himself pitching the best ball of his career. That year, in the drive for the National League pennant, he ended up winning 13 out of 14 games.

DEVELOPMENT

Yes, there are all kinds of theories about how to motivate people. We can do it through guilt, through fear, through shame. But they were not the methods of Jesus! Jesus motivated through positive messages of hope and of encouragement and so, too, should we.

Consider today's scripture passage. We find Him saying to His followers, "You are the light of the world". Imagine that? Here was a motley crew of farmers and fishermen and tax collectors and housewives in a tiny, remote village in an obscure part of the world and Jesus was saying to them, "You are the light of the world". Talk about a statement of faith. Talk about a crazy idea. This bunch of nobodies being a "light for the world". It must have sounded absurd at the time even to them. Idle chatter? Sounds like it. Only Jesus could have seen that through this handful of nobodies that He would indeed change the world. "You are the light of the world" He said to them and do you want to hear something really absurd...so, too, are we! He says the same to us. Think about and sink your teeth into that. Savor it. You and I...."the light of the world".

What does it mean? Let me suggest some possibilities to you.

A RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS WORLD

To me, first of all, it means that we have a responsibility for the world.

That makes sense, doesn't it? "We are the light of the world". A light house steers ships away from the rocks. A light bulb helps to light up a room that's been in darkness. Light does not exist for its own glory, but to brighten up the world. That's the first thing that Jesus is saying to us: brothers and sisters, we have a responsibility for this world!

I was reading recently about a rather remarkable young man. He was a young man who had been left blind in both eyes by a childhood accident. In 19th century France, when this young man lived, blind children had little help and few hopes. But then a kind priest by the name of Father Jacques Palluy took an interest in this young boy. The boy's intelligence and eagerness to learn touched him. And with his parent's permission, Father Palluy enrolled the boy in the Royal Institute of Blind Youth in Paris.

Thrust into a new and frightening environment, the boy was lonely and terribly depressed. However, in time he found friendship and encouragement. Unfortunately he was greatly frustrated by the institute's lack of books in raised print. He also found the symbols in raised print to be confusing and so he set out, at twelve years of age, to invent his own system.

After about three years he managed to perfect the method, but he encountered indifference and hostility when he tried to convince the world that his system was better. Even with the support of the institute's director, he was told again and again that he was too young to have created a workable alphabet for the blind. Well...the years went by. This young man grew older and became a teacher at the institute and also became a fine organist...but was always hoping that his method would find acceptance. But his health was frail and it was not until he lay in bed, dying of tuberculosis that he heard that the first steps were being taken to popularize his system. Though he did not live to witness it, Louis Braille's alphabet became a universal method of reading for the blind. His courage and his hunger for knowledge enabled him to triumph over disability and disease and open new worlds for future generations.

Louis Braille became light for those whose physical eyes had failed them. And how wonderful it is when a person sets out to make the world a better place. Some of you may remember that day when the pulpits of this land would sound with the "call" for young men and women to "go out" as missionaries to be lights to a darkened world. We don't sound that trumpet like we once did. We don't call people to really sacrifice all they have and all they are for the good of humanity and it's sad....for we are still "the light of the world". We have a responsibility for the world, for the Church and each of us should be doing something to help light God's light bulb!

WE HAVE SOMETHING THE WORLD DESPERATELY NEEDS

We also have something that the world desperately needs.

Put this down as the second point. We have something the world cannot find anywhere else.

Mother Teresa was speaking to some persons who had come to meet her and to hear her speak. Among the groups to which she spoke was one of religious sisters from many North American orders. Following her talk she asked if there were any questions and a woman sitting near the front said, "Yes...I have one.."

"As you know...most of the orders represented here have been losing members. It seems that more and more women are leaving all the time, and yet your order is attracting thousands upon thousands.....what do you do?" *Gimmick?*

And without hesitating, Mother Teresa responded quietly, "I give them Jesus..."

"Yes, I know...." said the woman..."but take habits, for example....do your women object to wearing habits? And the rules of the order...how do you do it?"

"I give them Jesus" Mother Teresa replied.

"Yes, I know....Mother"...."But can you be more specific?" said the woman. "I give them Jesus" Mother Teresa said again. "Mother....we are all of us...aware of your fine work. I want to know about something else...." Mother Teresa again said, "I give them Jesus. There is nothing else."

What do we have that the world cannot find anywhere else? All we have is the person of Jesus!

We're often reminded that we live in a pluralistic world. Today there are people of different religious backgrounds finding a home in our land and we can learn many many things from our new neighbors. But if someone should ask you, what is distinctive about Christianity, let me suggest that you do as Mother Teresa did. Give them Jesus.

One of the great heresies of our time is that all religions are the same. And certainly all of the world's great religions do have something worthwhile to offer. You can find good in all of them and help, too. But what you cannot find is the story of the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan, or the Rich Young Fool. There is no higher order of life than that which Jesus came and taught.

Christianity as an institution may fall short at times and turn you off and away. Jesus, "yes", the church, "no" was the cry a few years back, but if you understand the life and the teachings of the Man from Nazareth, He really has no peer. Literally. We have a responsibility for the world. That's first. We also have something the world cannot find anywhere else. Jesus. And this brings us to the last or the third thing to be lifted up here this hour.

REFLECTORS OF THAT LIGHT

We are not the source of our light. We are but reflectors of a much greater source. There is ONE who touched this world, this life, our lives and has given us the power and the authority to touch others.

UNITY
Eric Butterworth tells about a college professor who had his sociology class go into the slums of Baltimore to get case histories of 200 young boys. The students were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He hasn't got a chance!"

Twenty five years later another sociology professor came across the earlier study and he had his students follow up on the project to see what had happened to these 200 boys, labelled as "not having had a chance!"

With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or passed away, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved extraordinary success as lawyers, doctors and businessmen. The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case, the reply came with real feeling...."There was this teacher...." And that teacher was still alive and so he sought her out and asked her what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums of that city and into successful achievement. The eyes of this still alert, elderly teacher just "sparkled" and her lips broke into a gentle smile as she said,

"It's all very simple....I loved these boys...."
No wonder those boys succeeded. Their teacher
loved them! Their teachers believed in them!"

Once upon a time...long ago...there was a teacher who also loved his students. He saw possibilities in them that no one else saw in them. He saw possibilities in them that they did not even see in themselves. To them He said, "You are the light of the world". And so they became...and the love they received from Him they in turn passed on to others.

And today there is no place in this world where that light they received from Him doesn't shine. Oh, to be sure....because of fierce opposition, sometimes it is only a faint flicker and sometimes because of the weaknesses of His followers, the fire is uncertain and tentative, but still it glows. And now it is in your possession and mine. We are the light of the world!

CLOSING I don't believe that I'm being overly dramatic when I say that there are a lot of people "out there" in this world of ours who are lost in darkness....and they're looking for and hoping for and praying for a light....any light to lead them to spiritual and emotional safety.

I ask you to think about your light....the light you are shedding. Is it shining at full strength? These people wandering in darkness....could they find their way home because of you and the light and love you are casting off?

And Jesus said, "You are the light of the world"

That's the "take-home" message for this Sunday, and it suggests three things to carry away:

- First: we do have a responsibility for the world....for each other...for the Church.
- Second: we have something that the world desperately needs. Jesus!
- Third: And we are not the source of the light, but merely reflectors...reflectors of the true light of Christ. Let your light shine...and shine.... and shine.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. We believe that the deepest things within us are being stirred up in this time of worship....and that down below the surface of our lives, Your Spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love.

Minister to our personal needs. Walk through this community of faith now and be the help and comfort...the inspiration and sustenance of our souls. Comfort us in our bereavement. Steady our spirits in days of illness and keep our hearts steadfast in practical distress.

Let us sense Your eternal presence when the anxieties of this world would overwhelm us.

In temptation, in illness, in disappointment, and in depression and defeat...when we are tempted to give up, in success when we are tempted to be proud.....O God restore our souls.

May we hear Your voice speaking to each of us....reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to dedicated and victorious living. In the name and spirit of Christ through whom you have come to us, we pray. Amen.

Bless those our friends and loved ones from whom in these moments we may be separated by distance, but from we are not separated by thought and love and concern.