

“Set Apart with Blessing”

1 Thessalonians 5.1–11 & Matthew 5.14–15

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 16 November 2008

Both of this morning's texts are about light...and about **you**: “Beloved, you are *not* in darkness...for you are children of light....You are the light of the world....Let your light shine before others.”

One of the strongest primordial images for all living things is light. It is not just so for humans or for animals; light is essential for an incredible array of living things from phytoplankton to smashed pumpkins that now litter my street.

At this time of year, when the days grow shorter, we miss the light of long summer days. And some of us even begin to suffer from seasonal affective disorder. (I try to get out in the sun for a few minutes at midday, just to get an extra daylight fix.)

One of the amazing places I visited last summer in Ireland was Newgrange, an immense stone age passage tomb that is older than the pyramids, and only on one day does the light shine into the inner chamber: on the winter solstice, a day when people celebrated the cycle of light coming back into the world through longer days. (Amazingly, you can still tour the inner passage.)

Just last week, I was talking with some of our members about energy as an image of God – that God is energy. Light, of course, is energy that comes in discreet packages called **photons**. Here is what part of our text sounds like in the Greek of the New Testament (listen for the root of photon): “*Meis este to phos tou kosmou.*” “You are the light – the *phos* – of the world.”

And one of my favorite short prayers – which I sometimes use when I'm entering a period of silent prayer – is “Lord Jesus Christ, you are the light (*phos*) of the world). Fill my mind with your peace and my heart with your love.”

Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. And if that light – the divine spark – is of God, then we have the flicker of the divine within us. We are “the children of light” and the conduit of God's energy.



So, how do we let our light shine?

The first sermon preached by our Puritan ancestors in North America was delivered by a layperson, John Winthrop, aboard the *Arabela*, before it landed in what would become Boston. Winthrop talked about becoming a commonwealth, relying upon one another and on God...doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. And he referred to this morning's text from Matthew famously in saying, “We shall be a City upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

Just as our ancestors in the faith were, so are we as a city upon a hill. We model for this community what an inclusive and progressive Christian church look like – engaged faith that makes a difference in the lives of its members and in lives beyond these walls.

Last week, in a Social Concerns Committee meeting, I learned that we at Plymouth provide more financial support to the Interfaith Council of Fort Collins than any other faith community. Our leadership is not just a light; it's a beacon.

As an Open and Affirming congregation, we have provided a welcome to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks for years, and we are known widely as a congregation that includes people in all aspects of the life of the church, regardless of their sexuality. And if you gathered with others in solidarity in Old Town Square yesterday, you saw a lot of familiar Plymouth faces. We aren't just a light, we're a beacon.

Last Sunday, we had 17 or 18 kids in our preschool class. For them, we are not just a light, but a beacon, welcoming them into a relationship with God that will shine throughout their lives.



Our light at Plymouth shines for two reasons: First, because **God's** light illuminates this community, and Second, because **your** light shines. Edith Wharton wrote, "There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

How are **you** the mirror that reflects God's light? How are **you** a beacon? Let me put that another way: How are you a blessing to people around you? Jamie mentioned in her sermon last week that "There are a lot of people here who *bother* about a lot of things. So many of you go about the task of this life with a kind of determination and hopefulness that inspires me." You – as a congregation – are a blessing to so many people that we'll never be able to tally the numbers or estimate the impact.

In the UCC, we tend most often to be a blessing with our actions, and that is perhaps the most important manner in which to mirror God's light. But we also need ritual moments of blessing, of consecration, when we set apart something, acknowledge its inherent holiness, and name it as sacred. We do this with bread and wine each Sunday: they are in and of themselves already sacred produce of God's earth, but we set them apart as we name them holy. Sharon did this two weeks ago with a plot of ground on the western edge of our property; the soil of our memorial garden is already hallowed by God, but we set it apart and name it as holy. Each child we baptize is already a holy gift from God, but the act of baptism sets the child apart, naming that child as a sacred son or daughter of God. And we do this today with our pledge cards; we set apart a portion of our wealth – the work of our hands, hearts, and minds – as we name our commitments as holy.

These acts of setting aside, of naming, of ritual, are the acts of consecration and blessing.

As together we move toward the consecration of communion elements and of our pledges for the coming year, I'd like to share some words from the late John O'Donohue, a wonderfully wise Irish poet and former Roman Catholic priest:

"There is a quiet light that shines in every heart. It draws no attention to itself, though it is always secretly there. It is what illuminates our minds to see beauty, our desire to seek possibility, and our hearts to find love. Without this subtle quickening, our days would be empty and wearisome, and no horizon would ever awaken our longing. Our passion for life is quietly sustained from somewhere in us that is wedded to the **energy** and excitement of life. This shy inner light is what enables us to recognize and receive our very presence here as blessing. We enter the world as strangers who all at once become heirs to a harvest of memory, spirit, and dream that has long preceded us and will now unfold, nourish, and sustain us. The gift of the world is our first blessing."¹

Deep within you is the light of God; part of our human task is to let that light reflect through us and to shine as a beacon. Blessing is evoking and naming the best potential within us. To receive a blessing from someone is to be given a sacred gift of acknowledgement and encouragement. And blessing is not just for priests and ministers, it is for each of us. The world will be a better place when we, each of us, begin to see the world around us as sacred – miraculous – and name it as holy.

So, when you see God's light, share it, shine it, name it and bless it. **God bless you.**
Amen.

¹ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space between Us*. (NY: Doubleday, 2008), p. xiii.

Benediction

May your life be a blessing, reflecting the light of God within you.

May you live your life as if you have nothing to lose by loving.

May you know good friends and family in this place.

May you give of yourself without counting the cost.

May you make a difference in the lives of those around you and far beyond you.

And at your final hour on this earth, may the light of God illumine your homeward path.

Amen.