

Shine Hebrews 13:1-17

Introduction

A few years ago, Karen and I took a wonderfully relaxing vacation to Door County, WI. The location had been recommended to us by our daughter Alyssa. Door County is a peninsula on the northeast corner of the state. It is surrounded by Green Bay – the actual bay – on one side and Lake Michigan on the other. It should not be surprising then that this county has several lighthouses in it. We had the opportunity to tour several of them while we were there.

Lighthouses have always fascinated me. Without them ships will crash, and sailors will die. Having a lighthouse along the shore is nice, but it doesn't matter much if that lighthouse isn't shining its light for those ships to see. You see, lighthouses were designed to shine.

You and I have been designed to shine as well.

- That's a message you hear often as you walk with Jesus.
- It is a message that you hear every time we have a baptism in this congregation. Someone – often our Director of Youth and Children's Ministries – will light a candle and remind the newly baptized one of their purpose, quoting Matthew 5:14-16.

Let me quote a little bit more than that one verse:

*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, **let your light shine** before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.
(Matthew 5:14-16)*

Those verses provide the theme for this month. Our theme is proclaimed even more succinctly in that very familiar phrase found in verse 16:

Let your light shine! (Matthew 5:16)

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine ... because, like lighthouses, that's who Christians are. We are people who shine in the darkness, helping guide people to a place of safety and security.

- Christians are far more than just people who know and can teach good doctrine.
- Christianity is something we put into practice.
- For the Christian, there is no separation between what we believe and how we live.
 - If what you believe doesn't transfer over into the way you live, then you really are not a Christian. Because Christians shine!

That's what the text in Hebrews is all about. The writer has spent most of the previous 12 chapters teaching about what we believe, and then in this final chapter he speed races his way through examples of how then Christians should live. To use the language of a baptism and a lighthouse, these verses encourage us to let our lights shine ...

#1: IN THE WAY YOU SHOW LOVE (VV. 1-6)

Verse one sets the tone for all that follows in the chapter:

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. (Hebrews 13:1)

A bit of history... The book of Hebrews was written to Jews who had become Christians. You may have figured that out from the name: Hebrews. Because of their decision to follow Jesus, many of these first readers had been rejected by their friends and families.

It's a story that continues to this day. We hear it repeated:

- By people who walk away from Allah to Christ. They become infidels, orphans.
- By people who turn from lives where Christ was absent, and find they no longer have anything in common with their family and former friends.

When faith isolates people, for whatever reason, they need to be loved.

As Christians we know that we love because we have been loved first by Christ. We know what that feels like, and so we should be able to share it freely. We shine with love – and the light of our love shines on everyone around us ... even those who are rejected for reasons unrelated to a faith decision.

Notice the writer of Hebrews specifically mentions people who have been imprisoned and are mistreated:

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (Hebrews 13:3)

The light of Christ's love shines through in our capacity to be hospitable. This was an important ministry in the early church because:

- Persecution drove many believers away from their homes.
- There were traveling ministers who needed places to stay.
- These people needed to feel like they were genuinely welcome.

And as you keep reading in these first six verses, the love of Christ shows up

- In our marriages and homes.
- In our attitudes toward money.
- In the degree to which we find contentment with our lives.
- And our ability to face down fear.

The writer goes on. Let your light shine ...

#2: IN THE WAY YOU TREAT YOUR LEADERS

Three times in this chapter the writer refers to the leadership of the church, two of which are in the text we have read today. The third is in verse 24.

In verse 7 we are called to “remember them.”

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Hebrews 13:7)

This passage focuses on your spiritual leaders, not leaders in the political realm. Your leaders in the church, some of whom are currently serving and others who have are no longer around. Some of them served in positions of high visibility; some served behind the scenes. Good spiritual leaders always leave a legacy of faith that needs to be remembered.

My light shines because of such people as Merle Kraft, Jenelle Brown, Lawrence Dellinger, and Carl Douglas. There were bishops like George Weaver, Raymond Waldfogel, Clarence Kopp and Ray Seilhamer. Remember them, the text says, and imitate their faith. Let your light shine on others just as their light shined on you.

Remembering also means remembering in prayer. Could I ask you please to regularly remember to pray for the staff of this church, and for the members of the Grace council? Pray for our call committee, and for the team of people who will be working with me as we have a transition in our youth and children's ministries. These people carry an important weight for you. Pray that they would live lives worthy of imitation as they serve in positions of spiritual leadership in this church.

We not only remember them, but in verse 17 we see that we should follow them too.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority ... Do this so that their work will be a joy... (Hebrews 13:17)

We don't have to go far to find churches where leadership is treated poorly. We all know of churches where pastors are regularly run out town, where no one will serve on the council because of the abuse the church gives to those who serve, and so on.

This teaching does NOT say that you should follow leaders who are clearly going away from the Word of God. Most certainly not! The assumption in the text is that these are truly spiritual leaders, serving God to the best of their abilities.

And as followers we are called to make sure they serve with joy because we trust them and follow their leadership.

It would be easy to make this point about how you treat your pastor. I hope you don't hear it that way. I firmly believe that I am but one of the leaders of this congregation. The teaching is about all leaders.

Let your light shine ...

#3: IN THE WAY YOU WORSHIP (vv. 10-16)

Think of it this way. We let our lights shine ...

- To those around us (as we show hospitality)
- To those before us (our leaders)
- To the God above us (worship)

The writer describes a scene that would be very familiar to his readers, a scene that happened every year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). To symbolize their sins were being removed from them, the priest would carry the sacrificial lamb outside the city limits and burn it completely. And then that priest would come back into the Temple and offer the blood sacrifice required by the Law.

For the Christ, Jesus was our sacrificial Lamb. He too died outside of the city limits. And now we bring before Him our sacrifices. There are two:

The first is a sacrifice of continual praise (v. 15):

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. (Hebrews 13:15)

We don't often think about praise as a sacrifice. That's because we think of praise like we think of thank you cards. You gave me a present. I send you a card. You do something nice. I say "thanks." But that is not sacrificial. That's reciprocal. I got something therefore I give something.

A sacrifice of praise must cost me something. Praise becomes a genuine sacrifice when my prayers are not being answered, and my life is not going well. When Job was enduring his great suffering and his wife was encouraging him to "curse God and die," Job replied with the ultimate sacrificial statement:

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. (Job 13:15)

Sacrificial praise says "my life's a mess, but praise God anyway!"

The second sacrifice in is verse 16:

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

This sounds like a message to kindergarten children, doesn't it? Be nice and share your toys. Do we ever outgrow the need to hear that message? Stop hoarding your stuff. Treat each other according to the Golden Rule. God likes it when you are nice and when you share.

APPLICATION

In the Canadian province of New Brunswick there is a church building on Deer Island that for many years has served as a physical light house to the fishermen of that community. It is not that the building has any unique architectural design that would resemble a nautical lighthouse. In fact, it resembles the style of many church buildings built a century ago.

It is the location of the building that makes it ideal as a lighthouse. The Worship House for the Church of Christ in Lord's Cove is elevated a few hundred feet higher than the Cove below.

For many years the fishermen returning to port could see the lighted steeple of that Church building for miles from the water. In days before electronic equipment to guide them home the fishermen would aim for the Church building when returning to port. That course of direction would guide them past all the ledges and shoals, and safely back to the home port.

In the 1960's the government installed navigational lights for the fishermen, but prior to that the church building had served as the Lighthouse. Just as the physical light of that building was a light that led many safely home, so also the Light of Jesus Christ shining through us leads all who will follow his light to their heavenly home. May we also serve as a light for Christ to guide others to the home port of heaven.

Amen.