

Carry your candle
Matthew 5:14-16
September 2, 2007

Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

Your light must shine! Your light must shine into all the dark corners of this world! Into the streets of Calcutta and Port au Prince and Galati and Chinandega. Into the fields of Cambodia and Kurdistan and the Sudan. Into government offices in Washington and Moscow and Baghdad and Beijing. Into the board rooms of General Electric and Nestle and John Deere. And into streets and fields and government offices and board rooms and homes and schools and churches and malls right in your hometown!

Your light must shine. On hungry bodies and thirsty souls. On people trapped in darkness by addiction or shame or aimlessness or fear. On people broken by grief or broken by failure or broken by disease.

Your light must shine. On the people nobody else cares about. On the people who don't care for you. On the people you don't care for. Your light must shine!

But, remember this. You are not the light. You are not the light, but you are called to carry the light, and to let it shine!

You are not the light.

God is fire and ... the soul of each of us is a lamp. Now a lamp is wholly in darkness, even though it be filled with oil ... or other combustible matter, until it receives fire and is kindled ...

We are like unlighted lamps, capable and ready to spread light, but needing first to be lit! And God is the fire.

Those are not my words, but the words of Symeon, called the New Theologian. Actually, from our perspective, he is rather an old theologian, living from 949-1032 AD. Symeon lived during a time we commonly refer to as the Middle Ages and that some call the Dark Ages, an era, they infer, dominated by superstition and naiveté, by cultural and intellectual backwardness. But with the Enlightenment comes, well, light! Society turns from superstition to reason, from an inflexible creed to freedom of thought, from paranoid protectionism to an eager exploration of new ideas and new ways of life.

The Enlightenment, as it were, did spark advances in technology and industry and scholarship and government, and did lay a framework for greater human freedom and a wider application of basic human rights. But the Enlightenment also left us believing a great lie ... that we are the light. We can and must solve every problem and resolve every mystery, by the application of our own superior knowledge and our own supreme power and our own surpassing wealth. We are masters of our own fate, the captains of our own souls!

And so, confronted by the darkness of bitter hatreds and runaway greed and unthinkable human suffering -- or by the darkness of our own souls -- we look for the

right leader or the right political party or the right nation, for the new technology or the new philosophy or the new therapy that will bring light into the darkness. But the darkness persists and deepens, and we are left still sitting in the dark.

The church is not immune from this deception. What do we seek? The right leader, the right techniques, the right music to bring the people in! The new worship style, the new way of doing church, the new strategy to make us successful. We want people to look at us. We want people to like us. We want to be popular. We want to be praised. We think we have to make it happen if it's going to happen, whatever "it" is! But that's not our job. Our job is to let our light shine before people, so that they will see the good things we do and offer praise to ... God!

You are not the light, but you are called to carry the light, and to let it shine. There is only one light, one true light. Our job is not to create light, but to invite it in. Listen again to Symeon:

*Come, true light.
Come, life eternal.
Come, hidden mystery.
Come, treasure without name.
Come, reality beyond all words.
Come, person beyond all understanding.
Come, rejoicing without end.
Come, light that knows no evening.
Come, unfailing expectation of the saved.
Come, raising of the fallen.
Come, resurrection of the dead.
Come all-powerful, for unceasingly you create, refashion and change all things by your will alone.
Come, invisible whom none may touch and handle.
Come, for you continue always unmoved, yet at every instant you are wholly in movement; you draw near to us who lie in hell, yet you remain higher than the heavens.
Come, for your name fills our hearts with longing and is ever on our lips; yet who you are and what your nature is, we cannot say or know. Come, Alone to the alone. Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me. Come, my breath and my life. Come, the consolation of my humble soul. Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight.*

Poor unenlightened man!

Or should we say, poor unenlightened humanity? We can shine no light until we are set aflame, by the energy and passion and wisdom and love of the Spirit of God. But once we do receive God's light, we are called to carry that light, and to let it shine: to speak freely of the One who is our delight, to share freely the love that comes out of us because it has been first put into us by a loving and merciful God, to shine the light of truth and justice and grace into all the dark corners of this world.

So much of our world and so many of your neighbors are enveloped in darkness, waiting for light, hoping for light, dying -- physically and spiritually -- for lack of light. And you have it to give.

You are not the light, but you are called to carry the light, and to let it shine.

You are not the light. It's not about you -- your gifts, your talents, your resume, your reputation. It's about what is in you, the light of God that is in you, the flame of God's love that has set you on fire! You are not the light, but God shines His light freely, and gives it to all who are eager to receive it, to all -- to all of you -- who are eager to receive it.

The world is not waiting for the right person -- for one smart enough or strong enough or persuasive enough or capable enough -- to heal its wounds and mend its divisions and to bring it hope ... the world is waiting for you. So carry your candle and go light your world!