

“Loving the Light”

Depths of Love – part #4, from umcsdiscipleship.org

John 2:13-25

[1 - title slide] *Welcome, Prayer*

[2 – Questions] I’d like to start today with two questions for my white board. First, tell me one thing that you think everyone loves. Second, name one thing that no one loves. Let’s see what answers we can come up with.

It’s hard to make a generalization like that, isn’t it? Life is rarely that binary.

[3 – Spotlight] I will tell you something I didn’t love as a child: spotlights. I’m still not comfortable being under one. I developed a slight phobia of spotlights when I was about 5 years old. My mom signed me up for a fashion show for a local clothing store, and when it was my turn to walk the runway, I froze up. They had to literally pick up me and turn me around. I did not enjoy that light at all.

Lights are used to draw your attention to something. Think about all the types of lights we use: home and office lighting, car headlights, street lights, safety lights, flashlights. I still remember the first time I realized my cell phone could be used as a flashlight. I had to download an app to make it work, and now it’s a standard feature on all phones. Think of how cool stadiums look when the concert goes hold up their phones.

[4 - Flashlight at night] Light is certainly useful for finding your way around at night. I don’t use a flashlight when I get up at night to use the bathroom, and I am always bumping into things in my own room in the dark. Even though I should know the place, when I move around in the dark, I cause myself pain and injury.

On the other hand, fear of the dark is natural, especially for children. In the dark, we imagine things because we can’t see. Movies and haunted houses use this knowledge to great effect.

[5 – criminal] Is there such a thing as fear of the light? Not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense. I’m talking about the fear of being exposed, the fear of being found out. Many crimes are committed under the cover of darkness. A few years ago my catalytic converter was stolen in Chicago at 2am.

Even though we were surrounded by streetlights, I couldn't see what was happening. Certainly the person taking the converter did not want to be seen.

Our worst moments tend to occur when we are alone and out of sight. Some of the most serious offenses, like sexual abuse, infidelity and pornography, happen in secret, because most perpetrators want to go undetected. Yet even our propensity to gossip happens in the “dark.” It's not often that we talk about someone behind their back when they are literally within hearing distance.

Maybe we all need to overcome our fear of the Light, the Light of God. God wants openness, honesty, and forgiveness, and those things must happen in public, in the day.

[6 – Jesus and Nicodemus] We could certainly draw that conclusion from our scripture passage today. John 3:1 says that Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus at night. Why? Was Nicodemus afraid? Was he trying to keep this conversation a secret? Maybe, yet even Nicodemus was drawn to the Light of the World.

I've enjoyed watching the Chosen the last few weeks with our small group. The writers took some great liberties with the character and role of Nicodemus in the show. He is presented as an honest, inquisitive man, earnestly searching for something God will show him. He certainly seems less timid than the gospel of John portrays him, although the TV show is obviously biblically based.

What I really appreciate is how The Chosen tries to show Jesus as the Light of the World. Jesus goes around healing others, helping them, challenging them, and calling to them. That is exactly what the Bible says Jesus did, too.

[7 – Highway, Light and Darkness] The author of the Gospel of John loves dualities. Light versus Dark. Good versus Evil. Spirit versus Flesh. Love versus Hate. Life versus Death. It's all very binary. Everyone is faced with a choice, either one or the other. It's good to make those decisions, yet I also realize life is messy and generally more complicated than simply “right and wrong.”

Even this passage in John 3, which includes the most famous bible verse ever quoted, has historically even been used to justify racism. “Dark people” were seen as the enemy. They were persecuted, enslaved and worse, by Christians. Even if we didn't directly participate in those actions, that history

impacts still today, and we should rightfully mourn the times our society gave into darkness and inhumanity.

The fact remains, there is both light and darkness in this world, in each one of us. We must realize this is the battle we face. And now Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John asks, which will win?

[8 - Candles] Think about flashlights and candles for a moment. There’s a reassuring truth about light. No matter how great the darkness, one light always illuminates. You cannot “unlight” a candle to make a room darker. Darkness always gives way to light, and the more light, the better.

It is too easy to love darkness, to love sin and secrets. However, if we draw close to Jesus, his light will expose the cracks, the mold, our sin. I know, it sounds scary, like being in that terrible spotlight as a child. There is one huge difference, though. Rather than being exposed and shamed, the Light of Jesus cleanses, heals, and forgives. The end result is so much better than the trajectory we were on.

[9 – Cross, Light] What will we do if we are exposed to the light of Christ? What does that mean for his disciples, for those who worship him in the church? Should we go around with our little flashlights and start pointing out everyone else’s failures? After all, it’s so easy for us to see the sin in others. Isn’t that what it means to spread the gospel? To tell others what bad sinners they are?

[10 - Scriptures] I hope you already know the answer. That’s not the way to share the gospel, thumping people with Bibles. Our job is to accept, forgive, and love, not condemn. John 3:16 is a great verse to memorize. God loved the world so much, he sent his son. And John 3:17 is just as good. God sent his son not to condemn the world, but to save the world. Judging has never been our task. Let Jesus do his job.

Dr. Lisa Hancock of UM Discipleship Ministries says this:

“The motivation for everything we are called to do as the people of God is love. Not condemnation, not judgment, not defeating the enemy or the misguided or the ones who chose what seems opposite to the gospel of Jesus. It is about love. That’s what loving the light means. We choose that

which heals, that which transforms, that which honors and respects and sees all the people.”

“Again and again in the gospel accounts, Jesus says judgment is his job and not ours. Our task is to love as he loved us. As much as we want to draw lines and build walls, it has never been our responsibility.”¹

[11 - Two people talking] People can't know Jesus is the Light unless we show them and tell them. As an example, think of what it takes to invite someone to worship at church. It starts with building a relationship. If you start with condemnation, thinking about everything that's "wrong" with them, you'll never have a chance. But if you see yourself as a sinner in need of grace and approach someone in humility and respect, then God will open doors for you. I've seen it happen. There are people in this room today, now, whom others invited, not the first time they met, but after weeks, months, even years of developing a friendship.

Evangelism is not holding the John 3:16 sign behind the goalposts at a football game. That's nice, but that's insider language. Evangelism is living your life differently because of what Jesus did for you. Your actions, words, generosity – they are different if you have been exposed to the light and love of Christ.

[12 - Scripture] If your actions don't line up with his, pray that they will. We are all works in progress. Light will expose our cracks a bit. That's why Paul says, "We carry this treasure in jars of clay." (2 Corinthians 4:7) We can rejoice at our imperfections, because it displays the light and beauty of Jesus in even better contrast.

[13 - God, love, world] God does love the world, the whole world. Everyone is offered a chance to begin and sustain a loving relationship with Jesus, the Light of the World. God created us to be with him, and although our sin created a barrier of darkness, Jesus overcame that barrier by his own sacrifice on the cross. John 3:16 promises, whoever believes in him will have eternal life. John 3:17 says God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save it.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-preaching-notes>

Better said, God did not send his Son in the world to condemn you, but to save YOU.

If you believe that, if you choose Jesus, here and now, you are entering into a journey that will change your life. If you don't, someday you will answer to the Almighty God, who will ask, “Why didn't you believe? Why didn't you respond to my love? Why did you stay in darkness?” I would not even know where to begin to answer those questions.

[14 - Title slide] So let's make a decision, Church. Let's love the Light. Let's hate the darkness enough to do something about it beside just complain. Let's bring light to the darkness. Let's make our love bright enough that others will want to know the source. And then let's tell them about Jesus. Let's not hide in the church. Let's take the Light of the World outside.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: John 8:12b

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Reflection Questions:

1. As a child, were you ever afraid of the dark? Why?
2. What are some of the most beautiful or important lights in your life?
3. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? Does that represent a fear you might have?
4. If you are a Christian already, how publicly visible would you say your faith is?
5. What are some things you still keep in the dark? What would it take to bring them to the Light, to Jesus, for forgiveness?
6. Name someone you know who could use the Light of Christ in their life. Commit to pray for them, and ask God for the opportunity to tell them about Jesus.