

Onward: 1. How a Lighthouse Works
Matthew 5:14-16; Ephesians 2:19-20
October 21, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

There's a story that I remember hearing at least 25 years ago, and it came to mind again last week. There once was a mother eagle with three baby eaglets in a nest high up in a tree beside a lake. But the tree had been damaged by a storm and the tree with the nest was at risk of falling, so the mother eagle had found a new nest on the other side of the lake and now it was time to take the eaglets to the other side. Not knowing whether there was time to take all three she had to decide which one to take first. Her question to the first: "How will you treat me when I am old?" And the first one replied, "Mother, when you are old I will treat you just as you have treated me." The second, thinking he was wiser than the first, spoke up: "When you are old I will treat you and father as you both have treated me." The mother eagle asked the third one, "How will you treat me when I am old?" And this one turned out to be the wisest of three and replied, "Mother, I don't know how I will treat you when you are old, but what I do know is that I will treat my children just as you have treated me." And that's the one she carried to safety.

This morning, I want to talk about the church for the next generation – not just the generation of children here at Messiah, though I don't think there is anything we do here that is more important if we want this church, this community, and this world to be a better place. I want to talk about the generation that comes after the current generation of children – and the generations that come after them, those whose names we will never know. What we have been doing, regardless of whether we are consciously or unconsciously aware of this – what we have been doing will send a message to the next generation. And while we have been busy doing all the things we do to be the church, our world has changed. To many people, the church seems irrelevant. In 1982, I was appointed to this church located in the west end neighborhood of Duluth. When I arrived, they told me how excited they were to see me and how I could help them celebrate their 100th anniversary in 1984. And on that anniversary Sunday, the sanctuary was filled with more people than they had seen in decades. I left soon after that anniversary and a few years later, I was invited back – this time, not for an anniversary, but for a funeral – the church's funeral. I don't know if you are aware of this but 6,000-10,000 churches in the United States are dying each year. That means around 100-200 churches will close this week. It's tempting to blame secular culture, national politics, or church leaders for the decline, but I believe it's not external forces that are our greatest threat but internal forces. It's what that church in Duluth that I loved and served had forgotten.

After 9/11, there was a firestorm of religious skepticism that swept this country. Initially, it was skepticism directed toward Islam but now its skepticism of all religions. It has fueled the rise of Nones, the religiously unaffiliated. Currently 25% of Americans identify themselves as unaffiliated. In 2007, that number was 16% of our population and in just the past ten years, it has grown to 25%. And 35% of men and women under the age of 35 consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, and most of them grew up in the church. Most grew up going to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. They participated in youth groups, service projects, and mission trips. They grew up listening to the same sermons you did, but 70% of them view the Bible as irrelevant – an ancient document with no relevance to their lives. When they are asked why they are religiously unaffiliated, the primary reason is they just don't believe. For some of you, this is the story of your children and grandchildren, the story of people you love and care about, the story of your best friend – and you don't understand. They heard what you hear but came to an entirely different conclusion – and they are not bad people. They are some of the very best people you know.

Since the Reformation, the church has taught that the Bible was the foundation of the Christian faith. Luther taught that. Calvin taught that. Wesley taught that. And maybe you were taught that, but it's not. Long before there was what we know as the Bible. Long before there were Christian Scriptures, there were Christians – extraordinary Christians, men and women who risked their lives for what they believe and they had no Bible. Their lives were fueled by an event and that event was the resurrection of Jesus. It's the foundation of our faith. Something happened on Easter morning when sad and disillusioned people stared into an empty tomb and met their resurrected friend. Paul, the apostle, who once knew every possible argument to disprove who Jesus said he was and his followers said he was, met the risen Christ one day while he was on his way to kill Christians and in that moment he went from persecutor to someone who could not stop talking about Jesus. In this letter to the earliest churches, he wrote: **You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.** It wasn't the Bible – and I love the Bible, I read it every day and find strength, encouragement, and direction from what I read. I hear God speaking to me through the Bible. But if it were not for Jesus, we would have no Bible. Our faith is built on an event that changed the lives of those who witnessed that event, those who heard about that event and those who have lived boldly because of that event. The resurrection of Jesus is the hope of the world, and I want the next generation to know that.

I've said this before: **Following Jesus will make your life better. Following Jesus will make you better at life.** And that's how this church will thrive, not just for the next 50 years or 150 years but until God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." He was speaking to disciples who were Jews. He was reminding them that this was God's intention for Jews. He uses the plural form of "you" to say you together – God chose you. The reason God had a special relationship with Israel is not that God loved them more, but God chose Israel for a purpose. They were blessed to be a blessing to the entire world. There was a purpose. And in so many ways they had forgotten that purpose – it was as if they had taken a light and put it under a basket. Even under a basket, there is still a light, but the only ones who can see that light are those who live under the basket. Until like the church I loved in Duluth, there were no more people on the inside to see that light.

Have you ever been to the Split Rock Lighthouse on Minnesota's northshore? It is one of the most photographed lighthouses in the world. Although it is no longer a functioning lighthouse, it had a purpose. When you walk the spiral staircase inside the lighthouse, you come to the beacon. When lighted, it sends out light that can be seen for 22 miles. (a distance from here all the way to the state capitol in St. Paul) At the center of the beacon, there is a lightbulb – a 1000 watt lightbulb. That's a big lightbulb but by itself it could never be seen from 22 miles away. A lens is placed around the lightbulb that focuses the light so that it is magnified to a distance far greater than the lightbulb itself ever could reach.

When we allow the light of Christ to shine within us, that light is focused and magnified so that wherever we go, the light will shine. It doesn't stay inside this room. We have a purpose. We don't just love Jesus. We love like Jesus. And that love is meant to push back the darkness and bring hope to the world.

On Thursday, I received a note from Oakwood School that a third grader has been identified who will begin reading to me every Friday morning for 30 minutes. I won't be talking to her or her teacher about Jesus, but I want a light to be shining through me. She doesn't need to know the name of the light to receive the benefit of that light, but it is important for me to know the

light's name is Jesus. Because I love Jesus, I want to love like Jesus. I hope her reading improves, and I hope teachers and staff at Oakwood see how we love Jesus so much that we will love like Jesus. And that's how the light shines.

Recently, we received this note from one of the Oakwood teachers: *"I want to thank you for all Messiah Church has done to support Oakwood this year. We feel so blessed with the snacks you gave Oakwood for our students. We have many students who on a regular basis do not have something to eat for snack time. Having all of these snacks not only fills their bellies with something so they are able to stay focused, but allows them to be like everyone else in their class during snack time. I also greatly appreciate the prayers your church is blessing upon our children and staff! They are heard and felt! Thank you for shining your light so that others may see him!"*

We are not looking for thank yous. Any praise that we receive is not for us but for the light that shines through us. **Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.** When our faith is anchored in Jesus Christ, we are magnifying the light of Jesus for the next generation. What is the faith of the next generation worth? Everything. It's why earlier this year we invited you to start praying for a child by name. Last Wednesday evening, we organized a "bless the business" at a local restaurant – and there were prayer partners have dinner together with the child they've been praying for. The light shines. A few weeks ago, we had a Bible banquet for third graders and their families. After dinner, we came into the sanctuary for a worship experience – and the part that nearly brought me to tears was the moment the child walked forward with his or her family and after receiving the Bible, the family surrounded the child and prayed for the child. Is there any child who doesn't need that? The light shines. Monday through Friday, families bring their children to Bloom. When this ministry was created we hoped that up to 50% of the children would come from families where the only way their child could receive the love and care of this ministry would be a scholarship from us. Last month, we exceeded that 50% – 64% of the children received scholarships and in a few months, we open another location – so the light can shine. Last week, you gave funds to complete 12 classrooms in a school in Sierra Leone that serves 900 children. Earlier this month, you gave so that another dozen women in Haiti could start a business and bring hope to their families and community. The light shines. Your partnership with Oakwood Elementary School, the meals you serve at Simpson Homeless Shelter, the support you provide to teenaged moms and to children in Kenya. You are letting the light shine so that the community around us and communities around our mission partners will look more like the Kingdom of God 50 years from now because of how we lived in 2018.

I peeked inside the box where you have been leaving notes to be read fifty years from now. Some of won't be here in 50 years, so here's some of what they will read: "Always remember, 'We are here to love, not here to judge.' May you continue to serve God and Jesus Christ." "My prayer is Messiah's next 50 years will find our church in the center of a strong spiritual revival in our community." "The message of Christ needs to be the center of life." "Welcome everyone to the supportive arms of church family." Or this one from a nine-year-old: "We love because he first loved us." I will be 59, I hope I stay to read this again." And I hope so too, because the church of 2068 will look back at the church of 2018 and know we cared about the next generation.

I can think of nothing sadder than to have lived and left no lasting impact on this world. The Bible tells us that a man named Methuselah was the oldest person who ever lived. He lived 969 years. Here's what the Bible says about Methuselah: **In all, Methuselah lived 969 years, and he died.** (Genesis 5:27) Yay, Methuselah! Way to go Methuselah. What's that tell you about

Methuselah? He lived a long life, but he must not have lived it well. He played it safe. He didn't take any risks. He didn't really live. I wonder, what will we say about you? She played it safe her whole life and lived to be 90 or 95 or 100. He never did anything daring, never had an impact on the world. Praise God? Or will we say, there was something inside her that shown through her and she made an impact. She brought light to this world. He refused to play it safe, he took risks, and it didn't always turn out well but when it did – wow, look how that light still shines. Will you be Methuselah, or will you live boldly for Jesus?

Great churches are characterized by three things: people who love Jesus, people who love like Jesus, and people who make sure the next generation will experience the love of Jesus.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 21, 2018

Day 22: Monday, October 22

Scripture: Psalm 62

Only in God do I find rest; my salvation comes from him. Only God is my rock and my salvation—my stronghold!—I won't be shaken anymore. How long will all of you attack others; how long will you tear them down as if they were leaning walls or broken-down fences? The only desire of this people is to bring others down low; they delight in deception. With their mouths they bless, but inside they are cursing. Selah. Oh, I must find rest in God only, because my hope comes from him! Only God is my rock and my salvation—my stronghold!—I will not be shaken. My deliverance and glory depend on God. God is my strong rock. My refuge is in God. All you people: Trust in him at all times! Pour out your hearts before him! God is our refuge! Selah. Human beings are nothing but a breath. Human beings are nothing but lies. They don't even register on a scale; taken all together they are lighter than a breath! Don't trust in violence; don't set false hopes in robbery. When wealth bears fruit, don't set your heart on it. God has spoken one thing—make it two things—that I myself have heard: that strength belongs to God, and faithful love comes from you, my Lord—and that you will repay everyone according to their deeds.

Prayer:

Eternal and loving God, moment by moment my day is punctuated by words, chatter, and talk. Some is understandable and meaningful, but most is needless, aimless talk with no purpose, no content, and no objective. There are words that hurt, talk that is cutting, and chatter that is childish and needless. Lord, help me again to realize the beauty of words and the meaningfulness of heart-to-heart talks. You speak a word and it "is." Help me draw so near to you that once again I can speak words of truth. Help me again share love with my words, and Christ with my words. Lord, help me enhance the meaningfulness of words with appropriate silence. But when I speak, let my speech be truthful. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Even if I never mentioned the name of Jesus, when did I ask, listen, or respond as if Jesus were present through me to another person? And if I missed an opportunity to be that for another person, what have I learned so that I will be ready?

Day 23: Tuesday, October 23

Scripture: Romans 6:1-14

So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? Or don't you know that all who were baptized into

Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. So then, don't let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. Don't offer parts of your body to sin, to be used as weapons to do wrong. Instead, present yourselves to God as people who have been brought back to life from the dead, and offer all the parts of your body to God to be used as weapons to do right. Sin will have no power over you, because you aren't under Law but under grace.

Prayer:

Lord God, help me! Help me. Help me? So much of my day is filled with "my," "I," and "me." I catch myself making decisions based totally on what I want, what suits me, and what keeps things mine. I fall into the trap of thinking that the world was built for me. The way of the world is the way of conflict. I get caught up in the world of decisions, and it traps and ensnares me to assert myself. It seems I must always speak for myself, stand up for myself, state where I stand on the issues. God, give me the presence of mind always to consider peace, love, and your way when I make decisions. Liberate me from thinking of my way and make me a spokesperson for your way. Help me resolve conflict by sharing the wisdom of your peace. Help me dissolve walls of hatred by sharing your love in moments of care. Help me to become a new creature that calls forth the new creature in each of your children. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

How would my perspective change if I considered a problem, issue, or challenge from God's point of view, rather than my own? Pause long enough before speaking or acting to ask myself – what would Jesus say or do?

Day 24: Wednesday October 24

Scripture: James 2:14-26

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity. Someone might claim, "You have faith and I have action." But how can I see your faith apart from your actions? Instead, I'll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action. It's good that you believe that God is one. Ha! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble with fear. Are you so slow? Do you need to be shown that faith without actions has no value at all? What about Abraham, our father? Wasn't he shown to be righteous through his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? See, his faith was at work along with his actions. In fact, his faith was made complete by his faithful actions. So the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and God regarded him as righteous. What is more, Abraham was called God's friend. So you see that a person is shown to be righteous through faithful actions and not through faith alone. In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute shown to be righteous when she received the messengers as her

guests and then sent them on by another road? As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.

Prayer:

God, food, food, food – for most Americans it is a way of life. Food with meetings, food with visits, and food to go to bed by. I have eaten enough in excess to keep two other people alive. Where is my conscience? Lord, help me to understand the needs of people around a hungry world. No – do not make me only understand; make me do something about the needs of people around a hungry world. Make me use this one life of mine to reach out to the needs of others, to help other people become aware of the need, to enable the hungry to help themselves, to quiet profit, and to answer need. Lord, do not allow me to be content just to love, or to say I love those in need, and to do nothing to answer their needs. Help me and use me to feed your sheep with a love that answers their need. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

We can be hungry in so many ways. What are some of those hungers? How can I act with love to those who are hungry? There are opportunities on our day of service this Saturday. Sign up on our church website at messiahchurch.org.

Day 25: Thursday, October 25

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

On that same day, two disciples were traveling to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking to each other about everything that had happened. While they were discussing these things, Jesus himself arrived and joined them on their journey. They were prevented from recognizing him. He said to them, "What are you talking about as you walk along?" They stopped, their faces downcast. The one named Cleopas replied, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?" He said to them, "What things?" They said to him, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth. Because of his powerful deeds and words, he was recognized by God and all the people as a prophet. But our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel. All these things happened three days ago. But there's more: Some women from our group have left us stunned. They went to the tomb early this morning and didn't find his body. They came to us saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who told them he is alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women said. They didn't see him." Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all that the prophets talked about. Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures, starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets. When they came to Emmaus, he acted as if he was going on ahead. But they urged him, saying, "Stay with us. It's nearly evening, and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. After he took his seat at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?" They got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying to each other, "The Lord really has risen! He appeared to Simon!" Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread.

Prayer:

Merciful God, why is it so difficult to recognize you along the road? We can recognize Tom, Jane, Anne, and Dick. But was it you? We recognize a flat tire, a pothole in the road, traffic that came to a standstill. But what about you? Why is it we do not recognize you? In the coming days, help me to recognize you in the stranger's look of loneliness, a co-worker's glance revealing a potential need for guidance, a family member seeking affirmation, a friend's search for help. Make me recognize that you gave yourself to others in an affirming way. Help me reveal you to others in an affirming way. In Christ we ask it, and in Christ we find it. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Did I find Christ walking the "dusty road to Emmaus" this week? Where did Christ walk the dusty road with me?

Day 26: Friday, October 26**Scripture: Psalm 150**

Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary! Praise God in his fortress, the sky! Praise God in his mighty acts! Praise God as suits his incredible greatness! Praise God with the blast of the ram's horn! Praise God with lute and lyre! Praise God with drum and dance! Praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with loud cymbals! Praise God with clashing cymbals! Let every living thing praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, why is it so easy for some to dance? Help me to dance. There are those whose dance is slowed because of hunger, hopelessness, precedence, or handicap. Help me, Lord, to quicken their step with a word of encouragement. And there are those whose dance does not match the music because of broken relationships, confused priorities, or different lifestyles. Help me, Lord, to offer the step of acceptance. And to those who do not come to the dance because of injured esteem, fragmented identities, or lack of hope, help me, Lord, to take the dance to them. Dance, dance, dance. Lord, teach us all to dance in your presence. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Many times my heart seems to know the joy of the presence of God, but my feet do not know the steps. How has the Spirit of God been present in me in a way that has moved me to "dance?"

Day 27: Saturday, October 27**Scripture: Matthew 11:27-30**

"My Father has handed all things over to me. No one knows the Son except the Father. And nobody knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him. "Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

Prayer:

Eternal God, I come to the end of another long week. My body is tired. My senses have been dulled. The strength of my soul has been stretched. Even my family has wearied from my schedule. But, praise God! You have not given me a task too great, nor challenged me without mercy. What joy it is to know that you are still with me, ready to lift me to meet whatever challenges are before me. Rekindle the light of hope within me. Ready me to love as you have

already loved me. I come to this day, knowing the joy of your constant and unconditional presence and love. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Was I able to be available to another person this week in a way that let them see Christ in me?
Did I sense God working through me in the events of this week?