

Olivia, Gunny, and Anthony today is an exciting day for you. You have completed your children's church, kid's connect, and confirmation instruction and are affirming your faith. This is also an exciting day for your parents and families. This is one more significant milestone in your journey towards adulthood, and I know how proud and happy they are for you. And believe it or not, this is an exciting day for every member of our congregation, because in a church this size, we all have known you, we have all watched you grow into the smart, good-hearted, faithful teen-agers you are today, and we all feel that you belong to us in one way or another. This is a day of celebration for us all!

In fact, this morning is an appropriate time for you to think for a moment about the people along your journey of faith who have helped make this morning come to pass. Not to get crazy, but today might even be an appropriate day for you to thank them for their witness of faith to you. This wouldn't be a bad idea for the rest of us, either. We all come to faith because others help make Jesus real to us. Who have those others been? I'm imagining that for many of us, including our three confirmands this morning, our parents and grandparents are crucial in our journey of faith. Martin Luther many times remarked that our parents and family members are really our chief pastors, preachers, and teachers. For you three, your parents and family have had you baptized, brought you to church, taught you prayers, drove you confirmation on Wednesday nights, made meals for VBS that included you, and in countless ways, contributed to your faith journey. They are deserving of thanks!

And what about the witness of our entire congregation in this way? Every Children's Church or Kid's Connect teacher, every VBS leader, every confirmation instructor, every person who invited you to be a part of music or worship or service in some way, every person who has made you three feel welcome, included, and needed in any way in our congregation has helped point you to Jesus. This means that we, as a congregation, must never forget the awesome responsibility we have to direct others towards Christ. Let me be absolutely clear about this: it's no one *else's* job in our society to do *our* job as a church; it is *on us* to provide Christian witness, education, and fellowship for our young people. It is our duty and our privilege. This also means that

you three, as you join our adult membership, also take on this mantle of responsibility. How you do so is really important, because you matter to us greatly.

So, let's think about that for a moment. One of the things we learn in our lesson today is that you not only matter to us—you matter to the *world*. All of us do. So, we're not called to serve God only in our immediate circle of church and community—God intends for us to be lights to the nations, or as Jesus says in Matthew 5- “You are the light of the *world*.” This symbol of light is especially appropriate now, because you three will receive lit candles as part of your confirmation. Just as you received lit candles when you were baptized. And each time those candles are given, we are reminded to let our light shine, not only in a small way for our immediate surroundings, but in a big way, for the world to see. You three and all of us are called to be lights for the world. And who knows where in the world your future may take you? Could be right here, could be across the globe. But, where-ever you go, you are called by God to be light for others.

Frankly, I don't think that's going to be much of a stretch for you three, because you are already shining your light all over the place! You are excelling in school, in extra-curriculars, in sports, in music, in service to our congregation in things like being teachers for children or communion assistants or musicians or lectors. I mean---it's just obvious when we look at you---You! Are! Light! Your light, the light of Christ shining through you, has *already* brightened our congregation and your immediate world considerably.

All of us share this same calling, to be lights to the world, and I'd like us to dig into that notion for a moment. The beginning sentence of the book on spirituality, *Anam Cara*, by the mystic and priest, John O'Donohue, is this: “Light is generous”. That opening sentence won my heart immediately. “Light is generous”. Because it is, isn't it? As Jesus says a little later in this same chapter of Matthew, God sends rain and sunshine on good and evil alike; God is generous rather than judgmental or paltry, and light is like that, too. And it follows, then, that to let our lights shine asks of us a generous spirit, one that does not judge or discriminate or presume to categorize or grade others on worthiness, but a spirit that simply and generously, shines, indiscriminately, like God shines light on us all.

We might do well to recognize that Jesus is giving us high praise in these verses from Matthew, which begin, not with a command, but with a promise. The command comes in verse 16, where we are to let our light so shine before others, that they will give thanks to God. That verse asks us to *do* something, doesn't it? But the *promise* comes first in verse 14, when Jesus tells us simply, "You *are* the light of the world." He isn't telling us what we *should* or maybe someday *will* be; he tells us what we *already are*. This isn't a job we have to do or a puzzle to solve; you *are* the light of the world. Already. And that's maybe not what we saw reflected back at us in our mirrors this morning, but if we take the leap of faith to believe Jesus-- it is true. True, even if we don't feel it. We may not feel bright. We may not feel enlightening. But we are. When we are as God created us to be, we bring light to the world around us. So, Jesus doesn't ask us to be something we're *not*, rather he asks us to be precisely whom we were meant to be: lights to the world.

In the 21st C. we easily forget what high praise this was in the 1st C., to be told we are light. Nowadays, light is ours at the flick of a switch; or if you have a Google home, at the whim of your command. "Hey Google", Phil and I say, "turn on the living room lamp", and there is light. It's a momentary powerful feeling. Obviously, in ancient cultures, and especially during their season of limited daylight, this was not the case. Light was precious and resulted from either sunlight or fire. With sunlight or the lack of it being out of our control, that left only fire within our control, and even fire requires fuel. We're talking about candles or oil lamps or wood, all of which were also not that easily come by in a country that was essentially barren desert. And that type of light must be continually created, stoked, maintained, and supervised. It was, literally, a much darker world in the era when Jesus declared, "you are the light of the world."

Imagine a world without light; it couldn't really happen, could it? Life can't happen without light, in the most basic sense of reality. Without light, there would be no life as we know it. But even apart from that, light allows us to see, to read, enjoy color, to navigate through the dark. Candlelight and firelight are beautiful. The lightening bugs I saw out in NY on the warm, humid nights, were beautiful—their quirky and quick little burst of lights in the darkness. Sunlight has the capacity to lift our spirits like few other things can. Jesus, then,

praises us *highly* when He tells us we are light. I mean, *light*—what a thing to be! Furthermore, he asks that we not *quench* that light, but let it shine.

Here, then, is what I find challenging about these words; believing them! Laying claim to them! And finding encouragement in them. Depending on the kind of day or week we've had, His words just don't seem credible. But this is what Jesus says about us, and Jesus speaks truth: You *are* the light of the world. Let your light so shine. Generously. Abundantly. Lovingly. Courageously. This is asked of *all* of us, who follow Jesus, and here's the thing—if we are able to believe and claim this identity of ours as light, we recognize that we don't have to be a blinding neon sign every day. A little light goes a long way! I've read that a single candle flame can be seen in darkness as far away as a mile and a half. Which I think means that if there wasn't anything in the way, you could stand on a dark night with a single candle on the church steps and the flame could be seen by someone standing on Knife Island. Isn't that remarkable? So, if you feel like your light is a bit dim, it doesn't matter; a little goes a long way. Especially when God is involved in the reflection process. Don't let yourself become discouraged. Don't just give up. What I hear Jesus telling us is this: don't fret if your light is less than blinding; shine anyways. Shine generously. A little goes a long way. Just be that light that you are and God will use it to bless the world. These are inspiring and energizing words for all of us this morning, and especially for our confirmands, as they make public commitment of their faith before us and God today.

I remember when my daughter, Elizabeth, was confirmed some years back, I asked her if she was excited, and she was. I asked her why and she said, "Because I won't have to go to confirmation class anymore!" Which is an understandable answer, and quite possibly you three might feel the same. But, I don't. I am sad to see you three complete your confirmation instruction, and so is my husband; we were the two teachers. You have been a delight, and we will miss you! And we'd all miss you immensely if you suddenly drop out of sight, having become confirmed. Fortunately, you have a number of inspiring examples of recently confirmed teens who have been continuing to attend worship or assist with teaching children or participate in numerous ways; we hope that you will do the same. Because we need you; we need your shiny lights; and more

than you may realize, you need us, too. We are a home and place of welcome for you, in the name of Christ, and that never changes, no matter what. There is always a place for you here. Here, where we can all gather to bask in the light of Christ and to have our own lights reenergized and refocused. Jesus assures us: “You are the light of the world....let your lights so shine”. Amen.