

Exposed by Light

Light and darkness, darkness and light.

Our language of faith so often centers around this imagery.

Light is good, darkness is evil.

Yet in our modern world, we sometimes talk about light and darkness with more nuance.

During Advent and Lent, the weeks leading up to our holiest Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, we look forward to the light of birth and resurrection but emphasize the importance of waiting in darkness, of sitting with it in anticipation, so as to better understand the light, almost as though darkness was a catalyst for something important.

My artist friends tell me that there are colors that can't exist without darkness.

We pay more attention to the effect that strictly associating light with good and dark with bad has on our brothers and sisters of color.

Does our modern reassessment of light and dark alter the power Paul's words have on us compared to the significance those same words had to the early Christians in Ephesus?

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.

Paul wasn't noting that the newly baptized Ephesians had been living in a dark world, he claims that they *were* darkness!

Not a lot of room for nuance there, essentially "you were once bad people!"

That triggers our modern sensibilities!

“Well now, are there really bad people or just normal people trapped in bad systems?”

Feels uncomfortably simplistic.

Live as children of light...Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Another element of this text that might seem problematic for us is our contemporary distaste for moralism.

The peaking through the blinds “gotcha” Christianity that has picked a handful of outwardly visible vices to focus on (that they conveniently don’t struggle with), in order to identify good people from bad people and in the process, elevate themselves to “good people” status, assuring that they don’t have to wrestle with the messiness of the world.

I don’t know what kinds of behaviors the new Christians of Ephesus had exhibited in their past lives, but I think we need to give Paul the benefit of the doubt that his understanding of Christian faithfulness was not simple moralism.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

There seem to be two levels of instruction in Paul’s words to the Ephesians: Truth following and truth telling.

First, truth following.

We may be turned off by moralism, but we also are passionate about being people of moral character.

As one commentator states:

“How do we honor the distinction between being moralistic--that is, focusing upon obedience to laws, rules, and regulations--and being moral, which seeks a blending of rules and regulations with the dynamic requirements of relationship?”

The early church needed a moral framework.

Paul is pushing the churches to turn toward the community of faith for a source of ethics, rather than turning toward the world in which they live. In other words, exhibit behavior that corresponds to the kingdom which you now represent.

That’s a logical and wise approach that we still use today, whether on the level of congregation or on the level of family.

We would rather have certain conversations with our kids as opposed to them learning about those things from their peers.

Truth following, in the context of the church, requires community discernment, and with it, patience and humility.

Cultivation of good fruit takes time and effort.

“The way to insight and truth is through suitable dialogue and sharing within the community of faith. Openness and transparency, the ability to discuss without demanding conformity, the strength to be influenced as well as to influence--such characteristics allow truth to emerge.”

“Caley, how can I participate in such truth forming work in our congregational context?”

I'm glad you asked! Join us tonight in the fellowship hall at 6:00 PM for round table discussion as our congregations discuss what it means to have Jesus as the center of our faith.

“But Caley, that sounds potentially awkward and uncomfortable, exposing me to situations and perspectives I might even find upsetting!”

Yep! See you at 6:00.

Live as children of light, Paul says. And also, expose the fruitless deeds of darkness. That second instruction is the real-world application of the first, but cannot be done with integrity unless we take the communal discernment of truth following seriously.

Put another way, the world has a speck in its eye and we are called to take it out.

But first, join us tonight at 6:00 in the fellowship hall to have the plank removed from your own eye.

We are in the darkness exposing business.

For we were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord.

I don't think that has to be an over-simplistic or moralistic statement. Some people choose darkness because they are sociopaths and want to watch the world burn, but most of us over the course of our lives have chosen darkness for a host of other reasons.

Sometimes we choose darkness because we are simply too weak to face our desires.

As Paul says in Romans:

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do!”

Sometimes we choose darkness because we are convinced in our minds that it is the lesser of two evils and will work itself out in the long run.

Sometimes we choose something that we are certain is good and in reflecting back on it later, realized that we had been complicit in working for darkness.

There is so much darkness in the world that the church has been called to expose, but Paul reminds us that first we must wrestle with, confess, and explore our own darkness. In community.

Then, and only then, are we equipped to expose the darkness of the world.

In Job 24 the lament is made:

*“There are those who rebel against the light,
who do not know its ways
or stay in its paths.
When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up,
kills the poor and needy,
and in the night steals forth like a thief.
The eye of the adulterer watches for dusk;
he thinks, ‘No eye will see me,’
and he keeps his face concealed.
In the dark, thieves break into houses,
but by day they shut themselves in;
they want nothing to do with the light.
For all of them, midnight is their morning;
they make friends with the terrors of darkness.*

I think of all the darkness that exists under the surface in governments. All of the lobbying, special interest groups and back-room dealing in exchange for money or power.

News dumps that take advantage of other big news stories that push through bills and agendas that would otherwise cause outcys
Sex trafficking networks existing right under our noses along our Interstate systems.

I think of Jesus' trial, forced through under the cover of night to ensure it was quiet and over with before the start of Passover.

Exposing darkness is depressing and difficult work. And I believe our church does it well.

We have chosen the burden of awareness over the bliss of innocence, forming and faithfully attending the peace center, which encouraged and continues to encourage advocacy on behalf of those oppressed by darkness and means of organizing to protest the powers that be, whether it be individuals or systems.

Many of you have been a part of organizations doing this work, or sat on boards, or read books, or wrote letters or made phone calls to political leaders.

The work is never done.

Paul passionately advocated for an alternative community that would live, worship and discern together, and then would radiate light out to all the dark corners of the world, exposing darkness to light.

Let us continue that sacred work of living into truth and speaking truth.

If you find yourself weary and ground down by this work, the strength and peace of Christ be yours.

If you feel challenged, disturbed and moved by this call,
See you at 6:00.

Ortman 7
Ephesians 5:8-14
First Mennonite
3/19/23