

Full of Light

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
July 26, 2015
Text: Luke: 11:33-36

One of the many things I was able to do on my recent three week vacation was to tackle some projects around the house that had been staring at Peter and me for years. For example, we cleaned out the garage. This may sound like a simple thing but it wasn't for any number of reasons. For one, the garage was jam packed with "stuff." By stuff I'm sure you know I mean mostly junk we hadn't taken the time to throw out interspersed here and there with good stuff we might actually use someday. Our garage is probably junkier than most because our house doesn't have a basement. The garage is in effect the basement so you immediately know what that means. Stuff accumulates there. It literally piles up awaiting the day when I will finally find the time not to mention the energy to deal with it. And I mean *stuff* piles up! Old clothes I want to donate to Savers, books and files we don't really use any more but we might some day, toys my children played with when they were little, gardening stuff, charcoal grill stuff, and don't even get me started on Peter's car washing stuff!

So, when Peter and I finally found the gumption one cool morning to tackle the garage and its piles of stuff, it was a

monumental task. But we did it. We tossed out stuff. We reorganized stuff. We took stuff to Savers. We cleaned stuff. And, we found stuff. One thing we found was a box of really nice solar garden lamps, six of them. I remembering buying them at Home Depot at a phenomenal sale, but I can't recall when. But it was at least two years ago. Since then we have moved the little box from one shelf to another to another in the garage. I even opened it once and promptly closed it. But, on this glorious day when Peter and I were determined to take control of our stuff, we not only opened the box. We decided to read the directions and put the six solar lamps out in the front gardens.

In all candor, I had expected it to be quite a production which is why I hadn't been able to face dealing with them. I said as much to Peter when he bravely said to me, "let's just put them out." But he persisted and I relented and before you knew it, we had six new solar lamps carefully positioned in our front yard illuminating our front walk and gardens. We both agreed that since we'd left them sitting on a garage shelf for who knows how long, we had no idea if they'd even work or if they did work, how bright they'd actually be. So, as it got dark that evening, I kept running to the window to see if they were shining. It was full dark outside, around 10pm, before I could see any sort of glimmer on the lawn. At that point, Peter and I went running outside like two

little kids to see if our garden lights were actually lit. And they were, shining more brightly than either of us had imagined possible. They have been a wonderful addition to our front gardens throwing dancing circles of light from their shining fluted domes. I admit to being absolutely entranced with them – and irritated as heck that they sat on a shelf in the garage for over two years. But such is life, isn't it.

Life is full of irritations and joys, good times and bad, scary situations and moments when we just know we are safely cocooned in love. The thing is that, most of the time, we don't stop to notice which is which. Oh, if something makes us really, really irritated, angry even – that we notice. If something incredibly wonderful happens to us, we pay attention to that too. But, most of the time, we're just fumbling along through life each day, dealing with what's right in front of us as we coast along in neutral. The truth is we're often so busy making our way through each day that we don't really notice what's going on around us each day. We literally don't see it. Or, more accurately, we may see it physically as in our eyes take in the image and it registers somewhere in the recesses of our brain. We know what it is we're looking at. But we only pay attention to what we really need to see in order to make it through whatever we're doing in the moment. If we're intent on getting out of that grocery store and back home as fast as we can to make dinner, we just don't notice the little old

lady fumbling with her grocery bags as we rush past her. If we're late to pick up the kids or the grandkids or the dog from the groomers or the dry cleaning or whatever, we just don't notice the scenery whizzing past the car window. Beautiful summer gardens, incredible cloud formations, sunlight sparkling off the river or the cove. We just don't see them, because we're focused on something else.

This is precisely the reality Jesus is talking about in this story we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. He uses this metaphor in the midst of a long day during which he's taught people how to pray and explained why it's important to pray. He's healed people and he's addressed hecklers from the crowd gathered around him. Frankly, by this point, Jesus is getting a little annoyed because the people just keep asking for another sign, another healing, another miracle. He's frustrated that they just don't seem to understand what he's trying to teach them about God, their relationship with God and why it matters. So, he tries one more time to explain it using yet another metaphor – this time a lamp.

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light,” Jesus tells them. The whole point of lighting a lamp is to dispel the darkness. I am like a lamp, Jesus is telling them, revealing to you who and what God is in your life by dispelling the darkness which

has kept God's love hidden from you, invisible because you just haven't been looking for it. Okay, we think. That makes sense. But what's up with that whole next sentence talking about whether or not my eye is healthy? Is Jesus saying that if I have poor eyesight, I can't understand him? I can't really know God? No, of course not. What Jesus is actually doing here is using a common belief at that time to help the people understand a very important reality about God. That ancient belief was that a person was able to see because the eye emitted its own light which, when it encountered external light like from a lamp or the sun, made sight possible. In other words, Jesus is saying you already have God's light shining from within you because God put it there. And, when your light shining from within connects with God's light coming from the outside into your life it becomes possible for you to experience the reality of God in your life and the world around you in a whole new way.

Here's the catch though. If you don't believe that you have an inner light and that your inner light is gift of God, then you will never be able to be transformed by all those light filled interactions with God that make up each day. Put more simply, if you don't believe you'll see God all around you, then you won't. If you don't believe Jesus loves you and is ready, willing and able to help you deal with your life, then you will never see Jesus doing it. And Jesus is saying even more here. He's also saying that it's not

enough just to get rid of your own internal darkness – your fears, your worries, your shortcomings, whatever it is that separates you from God – it's not enough just to ask him to get rid of that, to heal you of that. You need to do more. You need to open yourself to be filled with the light of God's transforming love because it is that love which changes everything. It is that shining light of God's steadfast love that allows you to see that next step through whatever challenge you're struggling with. It is that shining light of God's steadfast love that changes you into a whole new person, filling you with so much light from God that it shines forth so that everyone can see it.

John Knox, one of the contributing theologians to the Interpreter's Bible series, makes an even more thought provoking observation with regard to this text. He notes that when we only see the world around us and the people in it only in terms of how it benefits us, or annoys us, then we are truly blind not only to how God is acting in the world. We are blind to what God needs us to do in the world. We are blind to our own responsibility to be the people God needs and expects us to be. We are blind to God's plan not only for our lives but for the lives of all the people we encounter. We are blind to the reality of evil and darkness and how what we do makes us part of that darkness instead of God's light shining forth. This is made worse, Knox says, when we are so complacent about God's place in our lives that we fall victim to

false teachings about God and Jesus. I know this sounds strange, like something we would never do. But it happens all the time. It happened every time 19th century slave owners argued that blacks were an inferior race God intended to be slaves. It happened every time a black man or woman was lynched for drinking from the whites only water fountain. It happened every time so called God-fearing church people in 1940's Germany looked the other way when Nazi's started rounding up Jews. It happens still today every time a gay person is greeted with "love the sinner but hate the sin" language in God's church. It happens still today every time someone in a church, any church, says there's only one way to sing or to pray or to praise God. It happens all the time, the darkness creeping in to our very souls because we just don't see it.

So, what are we as people of faith trying to shine our lights out so brightly to do?