

## “You Are the Light of the World”

Matthew 5:14-16

Richard C. Allen

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There are a lot of messages “out there” trying to tell us who we are. There are bill boards and bumper stickers and ad campaigns. These messages are telling us we are overweight, over-wrinkled, under-educated, and under-funded. They are hammering home the message that we aren’t smart enough, aren’t pretty enough, aren’t sexy enough, aren’t cool enough. From every direction, there are messages trying to give us an identity.

In the midst of that cacophony of voices, there is the one voice, the voice of the one who calls himself the Good Shepherd, the voice of Jesus. He is the one who gives us our spiritual identity. He is the one we can trust, who isn’t trying to sell us something, who doesn’t have any hidden agenda. He says to you and to me, “You are the light of the world.” THIS is our identity. We are a LIGHT shining in the darkness of the world.

To have this identity carries with it a responsibility. We are not to be shy or stingy with our light. We are not to keep it in the closet where it doesn’t do anybody and good. We are to let our light shine brightly, brilliantly, from the top of the bell tower, from the choir loft, from Mott Hill and John Tom Hill and Apple Hill.

Lots of dark places remain in our world. There are some dark corridors at Glastonbury High School. There are some dark corridors at Salmon Brook Convalescent Home. There are some dark corridors at the state capitol. There are some dark corridors at Somers Prison. There are some dark corridors at South Congregational Church.

Those who are gifted with the identity, Light of the World, are to seek out these dark places and to figure out how to be a light in the darkness. I want to tell you about three people who have modeled what it means to be a light in the darkness.

The first is Raoul Wallenberg. This young, Swedish architect was sent secretly to Budapest in the last days of World War II by the War Refugee Board of the United States Government.

Wallenberg's mission was to rescue as many Jewish men, women, and children as was humanly possible from the death sentence of Adolph Eichmann. Working through the nights by candlelight, Wallenberg falsified passports and exit visas such that over 100,000 Jews escaped the death camps. What he did was absolutely illegal, but it was the right thing to do and it was the LIGHT thing to do. I can't help but think that in his formative years, perhaps on his Confirmation day, someone looked him in the eye and said, "You are the light of the world." Raoul Wallenberg was last seen on the Russian front. No one knows for sure what became of him. But I can tell you his light still shines everywhere anyone refuses to allow hatred to have the upper hand.

The second is Pamela Flaherty. This young mother of two who lived on Deerfield Street worked at Glastonbury High School as head of the Special Education Department. Her mission was to work with students who were really struggling to find even an ounce of self-worth. Her mission was to affirm high school students in ways they had never been affirmed before. Her mission was to discover those God-given talents that lay hidden inside the hearts and minds of her students. Her mission was to be a light in the darkness that comes when regular academic tasks are overwhelming and when defeat is the experience of everyday. In her childhood, her parents and her confirmation sponsors and her church school teachers read to her from Matthew's Gospel, "You are the Light of the world."

She is buried at the Hubbard Green Cemetery, but every year her light shines through a scholarship awarded through our South Church mission board to a student struggling in some darkness. Last year, the scholarship was hand-delivered to Jill Eller who had collapsed during a basketball practice and who is still recovering.

A third person is Tony Tolisano, now a student at Boston College. I received a letter from him on Thursday. He is spending the summer getting ready for a trip next fall to a place that is dark and frightening, the border between the United States and Mexico. He will be traveling with peers from BC to understand what life is like for desperate people seeking a better life for their children north of the border. He will be traveling with his faith and with his hope and with his love. When Tony was in Wednesday School and participated in the youth mission trips, he would always try to get the group to sing his favorite song. Not a Pink Floyd song, not a Madonna song, Tony would prompt us on the words of the old spiritual hymn, "This little light of mine."

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Tony will witness some things he has never seen before, hear some things he's never heard before, and feel some things he's never felt before. He will be a light in that darkness of intimidation. He closes his letter this way: I am grateful for what I learned from writing my confirmation faith statement, this trip is another step along the way to more fully finding God and the importance of putting our faith in action.

Members and friends of South Congregational Church, you are the light of the world. Do not be shy with your light. There are too many dark places in this town and in this nation and in this world for us to be hiding our light. Let your light shine, and the oil in your lamp will never run out. Let your light shine and the wax of your candle will never burn down.

Let your light shine and the Christ in you will be the beacon that removes the fear from the dark places. This is what I wanted to say on this Confirmation Sunday. In the greatest of hope, Amen!