We Shall Be the Light of the World

President’s Address
La Sierra University Convocation
September 24, 2009

“*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”

—Matthew 5:14-16

One of the stories I used to love hearing my dad tell was that of young Robert Louis Stevenson. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1850, Stevenson recounts how one night, as his nanny was getting him ready for bed, he slipped over to the window and saw a magical sight. It was a lamplighter, going from one gas lamp to the next. With childish delight, he called his nanny over to him and said, “Look, there goes a man, punching holes in the darkness!”

“I will never forget the first time I sat beside the Sea of Galilee in the spot where tradition tells us Jesus said these words. I was 22 years old, had just completed my junior year in college, and had been in Israel for less than a month teaching conversational English to Palestinian high school students.

I have photos that I took that day—the sun is bright, the blue of the water shimmers. Several of the pictures show fishing boats out on the lake, and one, off in the distance, is pulling a water skier. Even now, I remember the power of that moment, and the connection I felt to those who had sat in this same place listening to Jesus.

This passage, found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Many of us have grown up with these words—we may have even memorized them as children. As Jesus looks across the assembled crowd gathered on the gently sloping hillside, He begins to speak of how they are to live. Using language that is at once vivid and understandable, Jesus calls them to be merciful. To be pure in heart. To be makers of peace. He calls them to live as light.

At the beginning of this new school year, like those listeners in Galilee so many years ago, we live in a time that is all-too-often morally bankrupt and overwhelmingly selfish, a world that seems dark.
As we listen to Jesus’ call to live as light, it is impossible to escape the reality that light is powerful, it is revealing, and it cannot be easily hidden. As every child knows, in the middle of a nightmare, light quickly replaces fear with a sense of security.

It is also clear that as Jesus uses this word, it is active. It involves making decisions. To be light is to live with purpose.

There are many ways you will be light this year. You will serve in student missions overseas, you will participate in service-learning projects here in Riverside, and you will bring food to your roommate when they are sick. You will listen to others as they speak, you will be intellectually curious, you will tutor children, work in shelters, and you will hold a friend’s hand while they worry about a paper or a test. And as you do these things, you will be taking seriously the words of Jesus. You will be living as light.

In classrooms and in the library, you will collaborate, share ideas, encourage dialogue. You will create business value from sustainability, you will endeavor to understand the challenges of education and literacy, you will examine methods to reclaim polluted land, and you will embrace the role of social entrepreneurs. You will learn a new language, travel to Peru, and create art that will make people stop and think. And, as you do these things, you will be taking seriously the words of Jesus. You will be living as light.

Let us never forget the words of Isaiah 58:9, “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your LIGHT will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

This year, as we live as light, we will turn from indecision to commitment
    from apathy to enthusiasm,
    from reluctance to resolution,
    from darkness to dawn.

This year, as we live as light, we will focus upon moving from memorization to knowledge,
    from silence to questioning,
    from ignorance to wisdom,
    from bondage to freedom,
    from midnight to noon.

This year, as we live as light, we will transform hatred to love,
    inequality to justice,
    self-centeredness to service,
    darkness to light.

Marianne Williamson—in words that are at times attributed to Nelson Mandela, reminds us of this unique calling:
“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t save the world. There’s nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Odetta, the great American singer, often called the Voice of the Civil Rights Movement, worked tirelessly to help people feel valued and respected. In January 1991, on the eve of the first Gulf War, Odetta gathered a small group of grade school children close to her at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

What they all needed to do that day, she said, was to tell the grownups not to start a war, because war never solved anything. As she and the children shivered in their winter coats, she told them how important it was for them to raise their voices for what was right, even if it sometimes seemed like no one was listening.

She told them about one of her favorite songs written by Harry Dixon Loes, “This Little Light of Mine,” of the light in each individual, and how, whether standing up alone or joining together, each little bit of light can break the darkness. And then, in quiet defiance, she then led them in singing “This Little Light of Mine.”

La Sierra University, I call you to punch holes in the darkness! “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.”

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1 Matthew 5:14-16
3 Isaiah 60:1