



May 20, 2018

## God Calls Us to Shine Like Stars in the World

Pastor Vern Christopherson

### PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16NRSV

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. <sup>14</sup>Do all things without murmuring and arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. <sup>16</sup>It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

One of my favorite things to do in the summer is to go camping in the mountains. After the sun has set and the campfire has died down, I like to go for a walk and look up into the night sky. I'm always amazed at the sheer number and beauty of the stars. We get away from the city lights, the distractions of our busy lives, and yes, even our cell phones, and those stars can take our breath away. The darker the night, it seems, the brighter they shine. To me the stars are a reminder that we are not alone. There's a creator who has set the stars in motion, and who cares deeply about us and our world.

In our Bible reading for today from Philippians, a preacher named Paul encourages us to shine like stars in the world. What do you suppose he means by that? As we're looking for clues, it might help if we dig a little deeper into the story. Paul is a church planter. He has started a small house church in the city of Philippi. In a Roman world full of gleaming white temples, and any number of gods and goddesses to worship, Paul has the audacity to proclaim that God has come to earth in Jesus, and that salvation and life can be found in him. Some in Philippi believe Paul's message and the church begins to grow. After a couple of years, Paul moves on to another city and plants another church.

Somewhere along the way Paul gets arrested for his efforts. Evidently the authorities find his words and actions subversive. Paul has time on his hands, so he writes a letter to the Philippians from his jail cell. He tells them he's a prisoner for Christ. He'll soon be standing trial. He might end up being put to death. But he's not afraid. If he dies, he'll go to be with the Lord. What he's really concerned about are the Philippians. Will they be able to keep the faith if he's no longer around?

Paul assures them that they can keep the faith. They can work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Now, please don't misunderstand these words. Paul isn't saying that they need to work hard enough and be good enough to somehow earn God's love and favor. No, God's love is a free gift given to us in Christ. What Paul is saying is that they need to put effort into their newfound faith. After all, he's locked up in prison and can't help them.

Paul's suggestion to the Philippians is somewhat similar to leaving home and heading off to college. Suddenly your parents are no longer around. You're on your own. There's freedom. So now what? You have to decide: What time are you going to get up in the morning—*will* you get up in the morning? What classes will you take? Who are you going to hang out with? Will you go to a movie or a party on Friday night, and if it's a party, what if they're serving alcohol?

Sometimes our freedoms can get the best of us. I went to college at Concordia in Moorhead. Back in those days, we had what was known as the "freshmen 10." Sound familiar? Suddenly we had all these choices for food in the cafeteria and they tasted pretty good...at least for the first semester or so. On top of that, at Concordia we got homemade cinnamon rolls baked fresh every morning. They were piping hot out of the oven, and get this, you could eat as many as you wanted. Yikes! For me, the freshman 10 quickly became the freshman 25.

Paul is telling the Philippians: "Your freedom is a good thing. You need to take responsibility for your faith journey and make it your own. But you don't have to do this all by yourself. God is at work in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what is pleasing to God. Never forget that."

So, what do you think, is God working inside of you? If so, are you doing things that are pleasing to God? It's important that we stop and ask this from time to time, so we don't lose track of who we are and where we are going.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Einstein was honored by Time magazine as the Man of the Century. Still, even Einstein sometimes had trouble keeping track of who he was and where he was going. Once Einstein was traveling on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. He came to Einstein who reached into his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached into his other pocket. It wasn't there. He looked in his briefcase, but he couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. Still he couldn't find it. The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. When he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees anxiously searching under his seat for his ticket. "Dr. Einstein," said the

conductor, "I told you not to worry. We trust you." Suddenly Einstein got a sheepish look on his face: "But you don't understand. I need that ticket. I can't remember where I am going."

Let's be honest. In our great big, complicated world, it's easy to lose track of who we are and where we are going. Is your daily work worthwhile? Do you have friends who support and encourage you? Is your family strong and vibrant? Paul says: "Do everything without murmuring or complaining. Live good and decent lives as children of God. And in the midst of all the darkness around you, shine like stars in the world." What Paul is saying, I think, is this: "Don't just live for yourself. Make a difference for someone. Help them to see the love of Jesus in you."

There was a heartfelt obituary in the Post Bulletin earlier this month. It was about a person named Virginia Larsen who was from Austin. Perhaps you saw it. Virginia was a writer and a teacher at Austin Junior College. The obituary started out: "Every life story can be told through facts. However, a more complete life story unfolds through nuances, details, lessons imparted." The obituary went on to share dozens of those nuances and details about Virginia. To name just a few of them: 1) *Dig your hands in the dirt. Plant seeds.* 2) *Take time to have coffee with friends.* 3) *Even when it's hard, say "I love you."* 4) *If your friend calls at 10:30pm, crying, saying she thinks she needs to go to the emergency room, tell her, "I'll be there in two minutes."* 5) *Attend a Bible study for 25 years at a church where you aren't a member, because fellowship can be found everywhere.* 6) *Know without question that a second mother can love you just as fully as the first one did.* 7) *Bring strays into the fold. Adopt refugee families, invite international students over for holiday dinners, foster a neighbor boy, rescue a dog.* And my personal favorite: 8) *Put on a silver bracelet during a period of mission work and wear it for 36 years. Refuse to take it off for any medical procedure. Make the nurses cover it during MRIs and surgeries because you will not remove that symbol of your servant's heart.*

You know what these actions sound like to me? That Virginia was like a star in the world; that the darker the night, the brighter her star was shining; that she was trusting that God was at work in her, giving her the desire and the power to do what is pleasing to God.

So here's the question: Can you be a little like Virginia? Sure you can. When the risen Lord was preparing to leave this earth, he promised to send the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of Jesus. That Spirit would live inside all of us who are followers of Jesus, reminding us of Jesus' teachings, encouraging us on our darkest days, and empowering us to share the love of Christ with a world in need.

We call the day of the Spirit's coming Pentecost. With the Spirit's help, we see visions and dream dreams of a better world. We trust the promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And hopefully, we even shine like stars for all the world to see. Amen.

