

Calvary United Methodist Church
August 26, 2018

CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT
Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

Pastor Jeff and I invite our kids to come forward and if you brought your backpack all the better. You look great this morning. Come on over, Mason, you can come over. You don't need your backpack. I don't have any club soda to shower with you today, so you are welcome to come. And I do have a basket here.

Ok. So, school. Are you excited for this? Eager? Already have some school? What grade are you in now? Fourth grade. And you are in...in third grade. First grade. Fourth grade. Fifth grade. And what grade are you going into? Kindergarten? First grade?

Well, school is really important. Jeff and I probably have gone at least to...let's see, you have two masters, I have two, probably 25th grade. You know, and when I was in fourth grade I never thought, wow, the 25th grade, that sounds exciting! But it was, actually. Because school is, I'm going to give you a big word here, your vocation. That's a big word, right? What in the world does that mean? Well, what it means is that it's your job, that God wants you to go to school to learn, to grow, to make friends, to study really hard, to learn how to be a good student and then God will take everything you learn and all through your life he'll use it for good.

There's a verse of scripture around this, it's a really great verse and my guess is a bunch of people here memorized it. It says we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purposes. So even when you flunk a test, God is still and it's a great lesson. So I will give you a personal confession: in my high school diploma I got one of those plastic cases that it went in that you get when you graduate. My mother put my ninth grade report card in there. Now, I didn't do too bad but one night the kids were going through the hope chest that my wife has and they found my diploma and they looked behind it found my ninth grade report card and there was a big red 4 in French and my kids laughed at me. They said, "You got a 4?" I couldn't convince them that it was like on a one to four basis. It was one to one hundred and I got a four, basically for being stubborn.

So, that lesson has stayed with me all my life and my mother put it there just waiting for the day that someone would find it and remind me. But God has used that because we do have mistakes, we do have failures, pencils have erasers and that's a part of school, so don't be afraid of them. If it weren't for my mistakes I wouldn't know anything. I really don't know any French, but I've really been working on Spanish pretty good! And taking some classes in that. And I passed.

So, this week, as you begin a new school year, or you have for a couple of days already, know

this: It's your job and you want to do well on it. You want to study to show yourself approved to God, a student who is ready and eager to learn and second, know that God is with you in this, that as you are walking into those buses and into your school and into your daily activities, God is with you in all of that and we are too, that all of us care about you. All of us are with you in this too, which is why we make space for you and we make time for you because we really do care and we want to see you grow to be really wonderful people with good jobs and families and making a difference in the world and it begins here in the fourth grade or kindergarten or fifth grade or wherever you are. (Blessing of the Backpacks occurs)

Message:

Ephesians 5:8-21

Would you join me in a word of prayer? O Lord, help us to hear from you today. Speak to our hearts today, and I pray your grace will guide us that we may know a little bit more what it means to shine our lights in this dark world. In the name of Jesus. Amen

Ok, I got the clicker. I'm going to work with it today. I think. There we go. Oop, well, good enough.

But if you have traveled down Interstate 81, have you seen those signs as you are getting towards the Tennessee line about see Rock City and see Ruby Falls? Have you seen those? Well, we would go to my father's home in Alabama when I was a kid. We'd pile in the station wagon. We had a pink Edsel for a while. My father would say, "Do you want me to take you to school?" "No, Dad, it's okay. We are going to walk." It'd be okay to have a pink Edsel now. But we'd see these signs about see Rock City, Tour Ruby Falls. And we'd say, "Dad, can we stop." He's say, "No, it's a tourist trap." So, we'd go down there, you know, they next year, "Can we see Rock City? Can we see Ruby Falls?" "No, it's a tourist trap." So in 2011 as an adult, I got the chance. It was a tourist trap, exactly like what my father said, but I liked it.

Now, Ruby Falls lies about 1100 and some feet below the surface. It was discovered in the early 20th century by a fella. The site is the site of Lookout Mountain victory by the Union Forces over the Confederates in 1863. They opened up a passage and you go down about 1100 feet and then you come upon this site that you see there and it really is quite beautiful. Most of it is fairly pristine. They dug around the base of it to get a little bit more depth now and they put a bunch of lights in there. And you hear the falls and it's quiet other than that. And then the guide will always say, "Now, just take a minute and hold steady." And they turn out all the lights. And if you are in a place where there is absolutely no natural light, the darkness is profound. Just profound. And after about thirty seconds or so, they switch the lights back on again.

Darkness is something that is almost foreign to our world today because we have so much artificial lighting. Street lamps light up the sky, everybody has a little light. You can get those button lights in your closets that run on batteries. Even small towns. And when the power goes out, I imagine all of you have candles or flashlights. I mean they give them out all over the

place these days. But the darkness is really profound.

Still, despite the amount of artificial lighting in the world, we live in a dark place.

Now, my granddaughter who is going to be four in October, she's terribly afraid of zombies. I mean, she starts screaming when her brother, of course, her older brother acts like a zombie and scares her. And at first I thought it was funny, but it's not that funny really to her. I remember movies like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." Remember that one? If you grew up in the 60s, you know, and that movie where these pods came and then all of a sudden they took you out and this crazy pod was going around. Or "Psycho." I could still have nightmares about "Psycho," Norman Bates, right? And then you had "Night of the Living Dead" and those 70s movies like "Texas Chainsaw Massacre." We had a Halloween party in one of the churches I was in in the early 80s and we were supposed to do one of those scavenger hunts. We went to a cemetery to look for a particular spot and someone came out from behind the tree in a Freddie Krueger mask with a chainsaw and ran it. We all scattered. It was just too real. And of course all those Frankenstein remakes. But the world has only gotten darker.

You know, you think about this: we, along with our children are being taught to see in a way that takes delight in darkness and death. You can laugh at the "Rocky Horror Picture Show," parts of it are funny, but ultimately it's about darkness. And the darkness we live with is a spiritual one. Its effects actually are felt everywhere. It's not just that it's fun to go to the movies and get scared or whatever, it's just not good. And we have to wonder why would a teenager or an adult take a gun, go to a school or public event and even churches, and just randomly kill because they are hearing voices or because they are angry or because of probably 100 reasons. If the symbolism had been projecting that darkness is frightening but fun, I think that our children are now understanding that it is enchanting, and inviting. Well, if you've seen the "Phantom of the Opera" it's inviting. But our culture then continues to promote, "Come into the darkness." In this letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, John read that section, actually it doesn't say, "Come to the darkness," it says "Come into the light!"

The question behind the writing of this letter arises from the context that these brand new Christians who are aware that the culture they lived in always promoted darkness and it always led to death. But they are now awake, they live in the light of Christ. Nonetheless, they have to live in the cities and towns and villages that they have always lived. There is no mobility, not like we have. But how were they supposed to live in a society that overwhelms them with everything that is so opposite what Jesus has called them to be? How do they—how do we—live in the midst of a culture that glorifies darkness and death? And because Paul is working those questions, that is why this letter remains current for us, because it speaks to our condition.

Neither Jesus nor Paul ever counseled Christian disciples to withdraw from the world. Instead we are to be in the midst of our world like salt which is a preservative and adds savor or light in our culture. We are not to avoid but to engage the world with the message of Jesus Christ.

In this letter Paul is looking for this third way that participation in the works of darkness is not an option for us. We can't do that. Nor is it an option to withdraw from the world, forget it and say we are just going to have our own little cult, we are going to do our own little thing and not worry about the world that the way forward for Paul is to live in the light of Christ in the midst of a dark world. That third option is our best option then. It is our best option now.

United Methodists have a Wesleyan tradition. Wesley had the same thing. England was falling apart. People were in the midst of a social revolution, the industrial revolution was beginning. There was a lot of displacement. People were drinking not just men, but women, children. They were literally falling in the gutters and there much of a sewer system so it wasn't really a great thing and Wesley said the job of Wesleyan Christians, of the Methodist societies, is to go out and to be salt and light in this world.

Now, there is a cost to this. It involves a measure of sacrifice, a walk of discipline and an intentional focus on what we are doing and that means you have to keep your focus on Christ.

Now, you know that for a long time, the Christian culture was dominant one in America. We talked about being a Christian nation—although from the beginning, America has always been a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, but it was relatively easy to be a Christian in America; it was almost expected. But I want you to know, and you know it already, that day has come and gone. It is not here. But, that presents us with large option, with an option to be Christ to people in a brand new way.

The point of the Christian faith is not a building. You have a wonderful building, it's a grand building, and it's not simply to put people in the pews or money in the plate. That's not the point of all of that. That all has its purpose. Nor is the point of this faith to force people into Christianity. The faith we hold asks us to be Christ to our world, to be the body of Christ, to be the Children of the Light in the midst of darkness. That's what we are called to do. That means that we don't have to be all judgmental about the world. We don't be angry at people living in spiritual darkness for not being able to see what's obvious maybe to you. But instead, our option is to share some spiritual light that we have.

So we are to look upon our neighbors with compassion as we do justly as we bring people together in peace. So, in the words of Wesley again, we are to, you probably know this fairly well: do no harm, but to do all the good we can to all the people we can all the time we can and stay in love with God. So Church buildings then become centers for worship, for fellowship, for discipleship, for outreach. And you are doing that to a large degree and it is really commendable.

Now Paul uses a line that came out of the context of baptism. They would sing this hymn: "... Wake up O Sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you." So, in baptism we die to our old self, our old way of living, thinking and behaving. We rise to live a new life, a new way, with a new spirit within. That's how profound our baptism is. We don't often think about

it, but really that is the starting point for all of us, to die to self, to rise with Christ.

But we are not just left on our own. We don't have to just do this by ourselves. First of all Jesus sends his Spirit to guide, to support, to help, to direct, to correct. And Christians always gather in community to support one another, to share our common life together, to share the hope that we have, to encourage one another, and to learn to be a new kind person in this old world, how to be a new community of people who live by the light.

With the current issues in not only the Roman Catholic Church but it's in every church probably all over the world because people are people, the abuse of children by priests and preachers, but also the cover-up and the excusing of such behaviors by Christian leaders, it is difficult not to be disheartened, it's difficult to not want to give up on the church, but Christians don't always live in the light. You know that and I know that. But don't put your eyes in focus on them. Instead you look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who guides us. So even those all Christians don't live in the light, that doesn't mean all Christians live like that. The vast majority do live with a deep commitment to live in Christ, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God...

So that word from Paul is a very contemporary one for you and for me this week. Have nothing to do with the works of darkness but live as children of the light.

We are not perfect and no one does Church perfectly. We live by trial and error. I still have my report card with the big red 4. It's there. We make mistakes but we learn from them. French wasn't the language I was supposed to learn. Spanish is so much better. The Spirit of Jesus helps us our walk. And he somehow takes our fragile and poor offerings of self and uses them for a good we can barely imagine.

Do you remember the tagline from the "Motel 6"? Tom Baudette saying "We'll leave the light on for you." Well, that was all about hospitality to weary travelers. Well, what if you did that? What if you left the light on for people traveling in the darkness? So, leave your light on! Shine!

OK! I think we can that! Amen.