

Scripture:
Eph. 2:1-10
John 3:14-21
2 Chron. 36:
14-23

We were dead through trespasses and sins following the course of the world. We were the children of disobedience and wrath. But God loved us and sent the One of humanity to be the Light in our darkness. Beautiful words, but what do they mean? What does it mean to be saved by believing in the One of humanity? What is the light in which we live? What is the darkness which shuns the light? Those are difficult questions. It seems easier to stay with the lofty words of John and Ephesians and be content with the lovely vision of holiness than to attempt to make sense out of that for our own lives.

But believing in the One of God, the One of humanity does not mean intellectual, emotional assent to beautiful Scriptural words. It means something much more practical and much more difficult.

The light that came to the world was a radical light, as radical in our world as in ancient Palestine. Jesus, the bearer of that light, came with a new vision of God and humanity. A vision based not on good works done in the appropriate hierarchy or system. But a vision about God's love for people of all kinds. The love that Jesus witnessed to was a love that surpassed racial and ethnic lines, a love that was not bound by sex role stereotypes, a love that valued human beings precisely because they were human beings.

This is the good news of the Gospel. That while we were still caught up in power games and competitive good works God gave us the vision that we are loved because we are God's. That is the light. a light of love and acceptance that dispells the darkness of fruitless rat-races and cut-throat competition to come out on top.

But the power of darkness is still around us. The light has come and exposed us and our world, but many have refused to see, have fled the light to cover themselves in the darkness. This is the world in which we live -- a world of light vs. darkness, acceptance vs. competitiveness, grace vs. works, having value vs. earning value.

The other day I was at a conference on youth sponsored by the Youth Network Council. I was attending it as a staff person at YOUNG. An extensive debate was held over current legislation which would affect minors in need of supervision. As the discussion saxed eloquent participants began to talk about Reagan and the effects of cutbacks on current youth services. The air filled with popular phrases about future leaders of our country, the leaders of tomorrow, etc, etc. Finally one man in an effort to justify the cutbacks and talk "reasonably" pointed out that these dids, these alienated youth never would be the leaders of our nation, never would be anything outstanding, and that essentailly there was no point in wasting money on them that could be put to better use.

That's the darkness talking. It is the power of darkness which wants to weigh people in terms of current or future value to society. It is darkness that values people and accords them support and aid dependent on what they can accomplish, what good works they can do in our economic/political system. It is darkness which can say to alienated unemployed youth, "you deserve nothing from your society because you will never be anything important."

The other night in Bible study Jill Graham offered the example of attitudes in the academic environment. The basic working assumption for many students in her program is that human beings are essentially self-serving and competitive. Despite all kinds of observable data that might suggest a broader view, they viewed humanity as selfish and uncooperative. That's darkness talking. Systems that encourage us to fit into a perception of humanity as self-seeking and cutthroat ~~are~~ are systems of darkness. The darkness wants us to believe that it is reality, that this painful, competitive, demaning nature is the way it is, the way we are.

The light comes to our darkness. It comes telling us that God loves us because we are, we exist. Tells us that to be human is a good thing, that human beings are valued for their existence and not for their expertise. The light says to

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man of darkness, "these youth are worthy of support and social services simply because they are human beings, not for what they may or may not accomplish in the future." The light says that human beings are caring and cooperative, not just competitive and selfish.

Everyone who does evil hates the light. They flee its simplicity of exposure and hide in the darkness of rhetoric about competition for goods, categories of the truly needy and earning a place in society.

The light stands exposing the darkness, daring to question systems of required unemployment and service cutbacks. Daring to witness to the radical truth that human beings have intrinsic worth for what they are, regardless of their good works.

We have been saved by grace, saved from the darkness of competition and wrath by the gift of the grace of acceptance. The burden is on us now to take that gift to the world, to be the light in the darkness of our society, our town, our workplace. We are the ones now who are the incarnations of light, who are the children of God who are sent into the world.

The darkness must be dispelled. As long as it continues to itemize and evaluate people based on their abilities and works, we will have a society of darkness. We will have a society where one must earn one's value by doing appropriate good works. We will have a system that continues to create children of wrath.

I work 13 hours a week at YOU. That's an alternative social service agency for alienated teenagers. Every day in there I talk to kids who are unemployed, poor, caught in tangled systems of families and schools that render them fragmented and angry. They are children of wrath and they have a right to be angry because the dark powers of our society tell them that they're worthless, that they deserve nothing unless they and until they can prove their worth to society. In a system that ensures them almost no options for success and then tells them they are worthless because they do not succeed, they have every right to respond with anger and alienation.

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In the midst of that darkness the staff at YOU attempts to bring light. We try to build relationships that convey the worth and value of each of those kids. We try to communicate that they are acceptable human beings simply because they are human beings/ YOU is a place that is home, a home of caring, attention, and light unlike most of the rest of their world.

There are places for each of us where we can be the light in the darkness. Places where we can incarnate the love of an accepting God in a non-accepting world of competition. We can witness to the value of human beings in our education systems, our political discussions, our workplaces. In the midst of the rhetoric of darkness we can make statement of light to the people around us. We can be the one of God sent into the world with a new vision for humanity.

We have received the gift. We have not been saved by our good works, but God reached to us while we were still angry and alienated and has made us alive in the joy of acceptance. Let us find ways to take that life and that light into our world and dispell the darkness. Let us seek out the children of wrath that our society has created and be the light of acceptance and valuing for them.