



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
August 6, 2017 Sermon

Let Your Light Shine - MADD-LY

Psalm 139:1-3, 7-12, 14 - Matthew 5:14-16

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not go astray. That's from the Book of Proverbs, in the Bible, Chapter 22 verse 6, and **that's** what MADD Camp has been all about this week.

Oh, I know, I know: MADD Camp has been all about music, art, dance, and drama; it's been all about listening to, learning—and acting out—Bible stories; it's been all about playing the bells and learning to play the violin; it's been about going to Island Park, playing in the water, and getting ice cream sandwiches, it's been all about great lunches and great snacks and bright orange t-shirts; it's been all about singing and dancing, and dancing and singing some more; it's been all about learning to make art, and making art about what you've learned; and it's been all about being in “families”—families one, two, three, and four, each with great counselors; it's been all about being together, making friends, and having fun—***We're just mad about MADD Camp!***

So with all this fun, with all these things so young, so bright and so beautiful—what's a preacher to do? That's right; you got it: suck the fun right out of it, put a damper on it all: MADD Camp hasn't *really* been about all those fun things; no, what MADD Camp has *really* been all about is training children in the right way so that when old, they will not go astray.

“Let Your Light Shine!”—that's been the theme of this year's MADD Camp. And at the Celebration Dinner and Concert on Friday night, Brent told me that it's been a great theme: it's really worked. The music, the art, the dance, and the drama—all the activities, all the fun and all the campers and all the counselors—they've all coalesced around this theme.

So time to bring out the preacher's damper:

There are three ways—three general ways—to understand these metaphors of light and darkness: although each of them has at least some measure of the truth, the danger arises when we take either of the first two ways for the whole truth, when in fact they are only part of it.

First way: divide the world in two: there are children of light and children of darkness, and never the twain shall meet. And yes (you know this), Scripture does at times speak this way: the very metaphor itself—children of light and children of darkness—finds expression in the Bible on multiple occasions: the Psalmists speak frequently and confidently of the righteous and the wicked; Paul uses this image in several letters; it's found throughout John's Gospel; Jesus tells his followers to believe in the light so that they—we—may become children of light.

And this “you're-either-all-good-or-all-bad,” this “all-or-nothing,” this dualistic way of understanding the world *is* one we associate with children, especially young children. As a youngest child, I was sometimes taken to movies that were . . . well, a little over my head.

[whisper] “Mom, mom, is he a good guy or a bad guy?”

“Shhh . . . it's complicated, just watch, you'll see.”

And I have to tell you: sometimes I did see . . . and sometimes I didn't.

Of course, this dualistic way of understanding the world is not limited to young children. Consider our current political situation, inhabited, supposedly by grown-ups. One of the problems besetting our current political situation is the tendency on both sides to demonize the other side, to cast it all in ultimate, apocalyptic terms—*they, they* are the children of darkness, and *we, we* alone are the true children of light. What's the worst thing that could happen? That your adult son or daughter would bring home one of them—***one of them!***—to announce their marriage plans!

So you might be expecting me to say that we need to leave behind this childish, dualistic—even prejudiced—way of understanding light and darkness. Well, yes . . . and no.

Yes, in that the world *is* complex, people *are* complicated: it's not always easy to know who the good guys and who the bad guys truly are; we're all some kind of mix of good, not-quite-good-yet, and yes, evil—in our thoughts, in our motives, and in our actions. We need to seek common ground with one another, especially those we disagree with; we need to try to understand them and their point of view—whoever, whatever, they are, and whatever their point of view may be.

But also no: No, in that there really is good and evil in our world—including in our current political situation. And we must be a friend to the good, and hate the evil; we must stand in the light, and not in the darkness. The question is—and this is the question the Bible is getting at when it speaks of children of light and children of darkness—the question is “What is the fundamental orientation of our lives? What do we live for: light or darkness? the truth or all those lies? What do we live for: what is truly right and just and good or only what is good for us, what is convenient for us, and what we happen to fancy at the moment?”

You know, everyone says that education is about training the mind, and that's certainly part of it. But even more than that—and teachers, parents, know this—education is about training the heart and shaping the character. Education, in its truest form, is about learning to love what is truly right and just and good, and learning to hate the evil in our world that tries to pass itself off as right and just and good. And so the big question: *how* are our hearts trained and our characters shaped? Answer: Mostly by doing—by what we *do*; by what we *do* with our bodies, hearts and minds. By doing things like music, art, dance, and drama; by listening to, learning—and acting out—stories; by music that gets inside us and shapes our souls; by playing games and by playing them well and fairly; by eating together, being together, and making friends; by being in “families”—families one, two, three, and four—and by having great counselors. . . . and by being part of God's family and by praying.

Education is about training the heart and shaping the character so that we learn to love—not just in the brain, but all the way down—learn to love what is right and just and true and good. And you've already heard that love sung in song this morning: ***“We're just mad about MADD Camp!”***

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not go astray—***that's*** what MADD Camp has been all about this week.

So now for the second way of understanding all this talk of light and darkness, of there being children of light and children of darkness. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave the clearest expression of this second way, when, in recounting his own struggles, he wrote:

“Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through nation-states, nor between social classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted, small corner of evil.”

The world *is* complex; people *are* complicated; so we need to recognize all the shades of gray and develop our twilight vision. And yes, education (whether formal or not), can help us to do that. (In fact, because education *should* help us to do that, it's all the more distressing when it turns into ideological indoctrination of whatever stripe.) A well-educated, a well-trained mind can help us see the good and the evil in the twilight, help us to weigh the pros and the cons, and help us to see through all the counterfeit-goods, including those counterfeit-goods that are inside us and on "our" side. And—and this is important—a well-disposed heart and a good character can keep our minds honest in this process. It's a struggle, but it's possible—people have done it; I've known them, and admired them for it.

The danger here, however, is that we come to think that our world is nothing but shades of gray, nothing but an endless, twilight struggle. In other words, in recognizing the complexity of our world and our own complicated humanity, the danger is that we lose *hope*. After all, a mere recognition of the ongoing struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, in our world and in us, is hardly enough to give us hope—if anything it wears us out: we develop "ambiguity-fatigue." No, what we need is some assurance that the good—the light—will prevail in the end, and that we will be—we are—part of its prevailing. One of the songs the children sang this week in MADD Camp this week—it's called *A Lamp in the Dark*—says just this:

God's light will shine all over the world.
I am a child of God's light.
A lamp in the dark
A star in the night
I'm no longer afraid:
I have a light within me, and I believe.
A light from within that's where my journey begins.
This light is mine for all to see.
God's light will shine all over the world.

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not go astray—*that's* what MADD Camp has been all about this week.

Which brings me to the third, the best—and the most comprehensive—way of understanding all this talk of light and darkness. Here's the clearest statement I know of this third and best way: "*This* is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. And yet if God's light were to remain forever in heaven, entirely inaccessible to us here on earth—well, then, if possible, our despair would only be worse: bad enough to think we're stuck in an unending struggle between light and darkness—both within ourselves and outside ourselves; worse still, to think that the pure light, the true light, the splendor of light itself, exists—but exists apart from us, forever and entirely inaccessible to us.

So another Bible image of light and darkness:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him. And what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the *light* of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not—and will never—overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

And yet so *what?* Even so, even if . . . *even if* God's light has come into our world, what good is that if it has no lasting effect? What good is God's light coming into our world, if, by doing so, God is in effect saying: "You can see me a little bit, be dazzled by my light for a short while, but in the end,

when my world tour comes to end . . . well, that's it. . . It will all be the same—you will be you [right hand] and I will be me [left hand], and never the twain shall meet”?

But that's *not* what God is saying; that's *not* how or why God's light came into our world. Here's what God *is* saying: “Again Jesus spoke to them saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”

The light of the world has come into our world so that we may walk in his light and have his life; so that, through him, we may become children of light. Jesus says as much in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, *let your light shine* before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

You are the light of the world. So: Let your light shine!

“Let your light shine,” that's been the theme of this year's MADD Camp. And at the Celebration Dinner and Concert on Friday night, Brent told me that it's been a great theme: it's really worked. The music, the art, the dance, and the drama—all the activities, all the fun, and all the campers and all the counselors—they've all coalesced around this theme.

The light of the world has come into our world to make us *children* of light. Train *children* in the right way, and when old, they will not go astray. **That's** what MADD Camp has been all about this week.

So: Let your light shine! So that all may give glory to God, the pure Father of light.

And thanks be to God . . .for MADD Camp—“***We're just mad about MADD Camp!***”—and thanks be to God for all you good people who made MADD Camp possible—for all the good works that God has worked through you. Glory be to God!

Amen