

LIGHT TO ALL IN THE HOUSE
Matthew 5:14-15

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on February 9, 2020, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.

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I noticed the obituary early in the week but got distracted and didn’t return to read it until I noticed it again, online. It was the obituary of someone whose name was familiar to me from *The New Yorker*, but I wasn’t sure that I had ever read anything he had written. But obituaries are interesting to read, so I clicked on the one in *The Washington Post*, and was so taken by it that in addition to saving it in the cloud where presumably all articles I save reside, I printed this one out and underlined several quotes *from* or *about* the person about whom the obituary was written.

His name was George Steiner. He passed away Monday at the age of 90 at his home in Cambridge, England. He had indeed served as the chief literary critic at *The New Yorker* for over thirty years, 1966-1997, having succeeded Edmund Wilson, another giant of literary criticism, in that role.

After reading the obituary Friday morning, I turned my attention, as usual, to the passage on which I was committed to preach today, the passage that immediately follows Jesus’ Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous of Jesus’ teaching which serves as an overture to his ministry in Matthew.

The passage which follows the Beatitudes contains several familiar phrases:

“You are the salt of the earth”

“A city on a hill cannot be hidden”

And “You are the light of the world.”

I had already decided to preach on this last phrase – titling the sermon “Light To All In The House” – but the meaning of that phrase was still unformed and undeveloped in my mind – until I read the obituary of George Steiner.

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Now it may seem odd for so highbrow a figure as a professor of literature to serve as a connection to a sermon given on a hillside by an itinerant first century rabbi, to fishermen and tax collectors and other ordinary people who had gathered around him. Yet Jesus' image of "light to all in the house" cannot help but call forth in our minds something ordinary and common to us all: images of light bulbs and lamps, made by workers in factories all over the world, unloaded in crates on piers in our country, transported via truck on I-80, delivered to Home Depot where we purchase them or to our doorstep where Amazon delivers them.

If our minds travel back to Jesus' day, his phrase "light to all in the house" calls up images of candles passed hand to hand in caves, with flames flickering and wax dripping; images of frightening flames on the ends of torches held by an arresting party that show up in the Kidron Valley, led by Judas¹; images of ten maidens with sufficient or insufficient oil in their lamps who are surprised when the bridegroom arrives before they expect him.² These instances of "light to all in the house" seem a bit closer to home for us than highbrow literary study in a musty seminar room with a large oak table and bookcases dusted only once a semester.

But hold on. Maybe there is more in common between Jesus' teachings and the obituary of a scholar of literature than at first meets the eye.

Let's listen again to the fullness of Jesus' words:

You are the light of the world.

A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

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.

What do we see in in terms of a connection between these beautiful words of Jesus and a few phrases *by* or *about* George Steiner found in his obituary?

I.

First, Steiner was deeply aware than when *light* shines, it is *darkness* into which it shines. Says his obituary writer:³

¹ John 18:3.

² Matthew 25:1-13.

³ Emily Langer, "George Steiner, renowned literary critic, dies at 90," *The Washington Post* 2/5/20, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/george-steiner-renowned-literary-critic-dies-at-90/2020/02/05/9b8d05a2-4783-11ea-8124-0ca81effcdfs_story.html.

In the background, if not the foreground, of all Steiner's work was the devastation of the Holocaust, which he survived by fleeing Paris with his Viennese-born Jewish parents shortly before the Nazi occupation in 1940.

This childhood flight would lead Steiner later to observe: "Europe is the place where Goethe's garden almost borders on Buchenwald."

In 1967, he wrote what would perhaps become his most oft-quoted words:

We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning.

When "light fills all in the house," George Steiner reminds us that it is a darkened house into which light comes to do its bright work. Likewise, as no stranger to human suffering, to human evil, to the capacity of humans to discredit, ignore, reject, mock, dismiss or destroy one another, Jesus Christ had that same knowledge, for he experienced it directly. The light from the torches of his arresting party. It is darkness into which light shines.

II.

Second, Steiner knew the sheer *power of language and words to shape us for good or ill*.

He was fluent in four languages: French, German, English, and Italian. He once told an interviewer from *Newsweek* that just as any other person might do a daily round of calisthenics, he selected a paragraph from one literary work *every day* and translated it into *each* language in his arsenal.

He saw it his duty and privilege as a teacher of language to hold up a work of literature and say to his students: "This is the real thing. Here's why. Please read it, read it."

For Steiner, the light of literature, of reading, of education, of knowledge, of thoughtfulness, of reflection, brings light to all in the house. "Please read it, read it."

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But as much as Steiner led generations of students to receive the light of language, he also knew that words can shape us for ill. "You can use human speech both to love, to build, to forgive," he wrote, "and also to torture, to hate, to destroy and to annihilate."⁴

Steiner's wisdom in this matter calls to mind words of a hymn we sometimes sing by Gilbert Chesterton, a near contemporary of Steiner's:

⁴ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (posthumously) and William Grimes, "George Steiner, Prodigious Literary Critic, Dies at 90," in *The New York Times* 2/3/20, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/books/george-steiner-dead.html>.

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide;
Take not Thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men;
From sale and profanation of honor and the sword;
From sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether, the prince and priest and thrall⁵;
Bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;
In ire and exultation aflame with faith and free,
Lift up a living nation, a single sword to Thee.⁶

The power of language to shape us for good or ill.

III.

Third, Steiner knew that light does not always shine naturally; that often, especially when we humans are concerned, it involves *effort* and *discipline* to fill the house with light:

- The effort of the candle maker
- The effort of the be-shawled woman to keep the flame from flickering out while carrying the candle from one side of the house to the other to bring light to her huddled children
- The effort of the crafter of words the use the human tongue for building up rather than tearing down.

Steiner was born with one arm less formed than the other and thus as an adult, one arm was nine inches shorter. He credited his mother with teaching him “if it’s difficult, it must be fun and worth doing.”

I could have bought...shoes with zippers [he said]. But it took me ten months to learn to tie a [shoe] lace; I must have howled with rage and frustration. But one day I could tie my laces. That no one can take from you. I profoundly distrust the pedagogy of ease.

It sometimes takes sheer human effort to fill the house with light: for the family, the church, the community, the classroom, the workplace, the public meeting, the campaign trail, the precinct of public trust and governance, the city, the nation, the world. It takes effort and discipline to fill the house with light.

IV.

Finally, Steiner’s obituary speaks of his *gratitude for life*. In an interview near the end of his life he said:

⁵ The Old English word from which “thrall” comes literally means slave or servant.

⁶ Gilbert K. Chesterton, “O God of Earth and Altar,” written in 1906.

...whoever is thrown into life has a *duty* to that life, an obligation to behave as a *guest*. What must a guest do? He must live among people, wherever they may be. And a good guest, a worthy guest, leaves the place where he has been staying a bit cleaner, a bit more beautiful, a bit more interesting than he found it.

Perhaps echoing the Palestinian rabbi two centuries earlier, speaking to his disciples on a hillside and by extension to us, in Alexandria and Arlington and DC and Northern Virginia: "...let your light shine before others, that they may see *your* good works and give glory to your *Father* in heaven."

V.

To transfer what George Steiner has said into the Christian context in which we worship:

We, too, seek to leave the world in which we have been staying as a guest a bit cleaner, a bit more beautiful, a bit more interesting than we found it.

For us, this is particularly due to the promise and hope we have concerning the world to which we are going, the world which has come in our midst in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world which is coming to us as "a new heaven and a new earth" upon his promised return.

And central to all the books of literature and history, fiction and poetry, wisdom and pleasure, detective fiction and romance novel we read, we hold up as central, this book, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, saying:

This is the real thing.
Please read it, read it.

Amen.