

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Feb. 9, 2020)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

(To begin this homily, Fr. Renninger picked up a guitar and had the congregation join in singing a very familiar song....)

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine...

Apparently, some of you learned that song when you were children! This song was written in the 1920's. It is based on today's Gospel passage, in which Jesus says, "You are the light of the world... so your light must shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father."

You are the light. Your light must shine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...

It may have been written as a children's song, but by the late 1950's it was being sung by civil right's leaders. Americans were stuck in the dark abyss of racism, but some brave people were stepping forward to create change. They faced overwhelming odds, but they did what was right.

This little light of mine....

I learned this song in the 1970's. One of the nuns at our parish had started a children's choir, and my mother volunteered me to sing.

Sister wanted us to sing some 'groovy' songs. So she started to teach us *this* song. It's easy to learn! Soon, she even had us clapping along. This was a new experience for Catholics – clapping in church!

Sister thought we sounded so great that she got our pastor to agree to let the children's choir sing at one of the weekend masses.

That Sunday, all of us in the children's choir sat together for mass. After communion, we went off to a side area to get ready to sing. We knew our song. We were ready.

But then we discovered that Sister had come up with a ‘brilliant’ idea the day before. She decided that this song would be enhanced if every child in the choir would sing “This little light of mine” while holding a lighted eight inch beeswax candle. (What could go wrong?)

As we walked up to the altar, Sister handed us our lighted candles. Most of us had never held a lighted candle before.

We stood in front of the altar. We started to sing... “This little light of mine.” The boy standing next to me was singing so loudly that when he sang “I’m gonna let it shine,” he blew out his candle.

The music got louder. We sang with gusto. But remember - when we practiced the song, we always clapped our hands.

And that is what happened next. Approximately 25 young children started to clap their hands while holding lighted candles.

Wax went flying. Candles fell to the ground.

And just as we started to repeat the 2nd verse, “Everywhere I go...” *it happened*. A blood-curdling scream from the other side of the choir. A little boy in the 2nd row had forgotten that he was holding a lighted candle. So... he lit Kelly Brockerman’s hair on fire!

Parents came leaping over the communion rail. The pastor yelled, “Get the fire extinguisher.” Someone grabbed a bowl of holy water and threw it at the girl with the burning hair. Mayhem ensued. (It was so bad that they forgot to take the second collection.)

As we left the church that day, I could hear the pastor and the nun having a rather ‘energetic’ conversation. Sister kept repeating, “I didn’t know it would be so dangerous to let your light shine...”

I didn’t know it would be so dangerous to let your light shine...

When you are a child, this kind of song – and this kind of Gospel passage – can sound so simple. You have God-given light within you. Let it shine. It will be fun!

But then you grow up, and you realize that Jesus is asking us to do something rather hard.

In a world that seems full of darkness, Jesus says, “I’m sending you into the world’s darkness,

and I want YOU to be the light, so that people can see the good that you do and give glory to God.”

Jesus is sending us to every place that is filled with the darkness of anger, and fear, and poverty, and mistrust... and it's our Christian calling to BE THE LIGHT.

Go be the light. Go do what's right, in every situation.

This light of mine has to shine. When I was a child, I did not know what that would cost.

When you're singing the song, 'letting your light shine' sounds so easy. Then you grow up, and...

+ then you become a teenager, and you're at a party where underage drinking is going on. You know it's wrong, but there is so much pressure to just stay quiet and fit in. That's darkness. But Jesus says, 'Let your light shine!'

+ then you become a college student, and you're on a campus where almost every social gathering centers on binge drinking and casual sex. You know it's wrong. But you ask yourself, 'How do I change an entire campus culture?' And Jesus says, "Let your light shine!"

+ then you get hired. And you realize that you are in a toxic work environment, where good people are mistreated, and injustice happens on a daily basis. So much darkness. You want to escape... but Jesus says, "Let your light shine!"

+ then you look around at legal, social and economic policies which, in the words of Pope Francis, relegate some people to the 'unseen sidelines of hopelessness.' The hungry are still hungry, and the homeless are still homeless... so much darkness. How can I change an entire economy? Then Jesus says, "Let your light shine."

+ so much illness. The sudden death of loved ones. Fears for your marriage, your children, our future. Darkness. Then we hear Christ's Gospel command, "Let your light shine!"

+ So much darkness. Superbowl halftime shows that resemble pornography... political grownups acting like children... dangerous flu viruses... an ever-diminished respect for the value of every human life...

Satan would love it if we threw up our hands, concluding that we cannot make much difference in a world of such darkness. When we do *that*, the darkness wins, and the light is lost.

Jesus calls us to that hard, daily vocation of *being the light*. *Being the light* in our family, even when it seems no one else cares. *Being the light* on campus, even when it seems no one else believes. *Being the light* at work, even when we wonder why God wants us to stay in that hard situation. *Being the light* as citizens and neighbors, even when we wonder how we can possibly make a difference.

That is our daily, difficult, even dangerous vocation in Christ.

And we can do it, if we remember one thing. In the end, any light we have; in fact, any love we have, any strength we have, any energy we have, *comes from Christ*. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says “I am the light the world.”

What is our vocation? To reflect *his* light. This little light of mine isn’t *mine* in the end – the light is Jesus.

So if you want to change the world for the better... if you want to demonstrate that there is an alternative to hatred and selfishness... if you want to continue the transformative work that Jesus set in motion... then take one step out of whatever darkness you’ve experienced this week, and **BE THE LIGHT OF CHRIST!** Bask in that light. Soak it in. Then let it shine.

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