

My Honor Student Is Smarter Than Yours
II Corinthians 12:2-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
July 8, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

Let's start at the beginning.

“In the beginning . . . God created the heavens and earth. The earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep . . . Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”

God made the light. We are created for the light, to revel in it, to reflect it. But we lose ourselves in the many weaknesses of our anger or addictions, the easy insults of our elected officials and political candidates, and the calamities of our neighbors, tempting us to draw even more tightly into the self-centered fabric of our personal cocoon.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

God gives us life, not only through the wonders of sight and hearing and taste and touch, but also the life of a Savior, Jesus, who teaches us what it means to be human.

God made the light. We are created for the light, to revel in it, to reflect it. But we lose ourselves, our very identity, when we miss the completeness of this expression.

You see, we hear “the life was the light of all people,” and we think, “Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light to all, the light given to everyone.” That is so very true. But it is not enough. It is not all.

In Jesus Christ was and is life, and the life is the light of all people. Think about that for just a moment: “The life is the light of all people.” Over and over we hear, Jesus Christ is the light given to all. But there is an additional reality, a challenging truth: The life we fully discover in Christ is the light that comes from all people, the light *within* all people, the light we discover *through our relationships with each other*.

Each other. I don't know if there is a less respected term, a more disregarded experience, a less honored reality right now in American life. You and I care a great deal about our safety, our security, our bank balance, our self-respect, our personal sense of identity, but genuine community with one another is moving rapidly down our list of values.

Even – especially – in our spiritual lives.

Here's an example: Casper ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan are both divinity school graduates. A couple of years ago they debuted a new podcast, “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.” Within weeks it had become the second most popular podcast in America on iTunes. Now they tour the country, speaking to crowds, mostly millennials, mostly spiritual but not religious, who want to extract the life and meaning from the text, but without the messiness of a community of other human beings.

Do you get it? I'll read the Harry Potter books on my own, and then I'll listen to the podcast on my own, and then I'll come to a one-off gathering with the podcast hosts. No “each other.” No “one another.”

Here's the irony. Casper ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan are dubious of their own approach. “Secularism doesn't speak to people's hearts and souls,” Zoltan said during an interview. “I get that people get connection and meaning from Soul Cycle, but will [those people] visit you when your mom is dying?”

“[Our spiritual life] is all being unbundled,” ter Kuile added. “You might get your ecstatic experience at Soul Cycle, and your community in your book group, and your [spiritual] formation in Harry Potter or ‘On Being.’”

But here’s the thing: The podcasters said they worry that all these disparate experiences leave people much lonelier than the connections that are all tied up within one faith community.

“I’m scared what we’re going to do without the buildings. Some of the best things in the world happen in church basements,” Zoltan said. “That’s where you have sex ed classes, and that’s where you have kids on their church trip to build houses, and that’s where you house the new immigrant, and that’s where you register to vote.... I’m terrified if there aren’t these designated spaces. They’re called sanctuaries for a reason.”¹

They are called congregations for a reason. They are called churches for a reason.

Let me be clear: I like Harry Potter. I think the books are full of important values for us and our children. I think the podcast sounds fun too. But the challenge is when you and I ignore the light within all the people right here around us, the light we discover through our relationships with one another.

Our beginnings speak to the importance of each other. Back in Genesis 1, at the very moment of the formation of humanity, God announces the priority of human community. “God said, ‘Let us make humanity *in our image, according to our likeness* . . .’” And the Lord did exactly that, “*in the image of God*, the Lord created them; male and female the Lord created them.”

This is why we pray for others.

This is why we worked so hard after Hurricanes Irma, Harvey and Maria to collect funds for our neighbors in Immokalee and Wimauma, in Houston, and across Puerto Rico.

This is why we invest ourselves in the sometimes even harder thing: Getting to know our neighbors elbow to elbow. Loving them in the midst of their faults and prickliness. Loving them even when they bug us to death and get on our last nerve. Forgiving them. And yes, asking them to forgive us.

We practice this out in the community. And we practice this in our church.

One of my spiritual mentors is a member and officer of our congregation. Week after week, day after day, I watch her connecting with other people, listening to others, respecting them, opening her heart and life to them. I learn a lot about following Jesus by watching her.

Her husband died a few years ago, and now her dog is the apple of her eye. They live together here in Sarasota in an apartment. Her dog hates fireworks.

Last Wednesday she discovered one of her neighbors – her next-door neighbor – LOVES fireworks. It was awful. She posted this on social media. “I’m so upset over the action of my neighbor. No respect for animals or for people’s property. I hate to say it, but I had to call the sheriff after my windows started shaking and a lightbulb fell out of my kitchen fixture. He must have some kind of power launcher like a professional for it to do that to my light. What’s wrong with people? I sure don’t like dampening anyone’s celebration, but this is ridiculous!”

Friends, does this sound familiar? It may not be fireworks. It may be the neighbor across the street with the loud motorcycle. It may be the neighbor whose dog poops on your pretty petunias. It may be the church member who drives or votes or believes differently than you.

¹ “Hundreds pack DC hall to discuss podcast exploring Harry Potter as a sacred text,” Julie Zausmer and Michelle Boorstein, Washington Post, July 19, 2017

This is the moment we are tempted to cut them off, let them go, disassociate ourselves from them. That's what we are learning out there, in a world that no longer cares too much about "one another" or "each other."

What do we learn from our broken, self-centered, messed up world? To never let go of our wounds? To allow our disappointments to define us? To hold tightly to our grudges?

Sometimes we turn away from each other. We protect ourselves from the people around us. And the light grows dim.

But remember our fellow church member? The one with the neighbor crazy about fireworks? The next day, the very next day, my friend taught me more about following Jesus. This was one of her next social media posts: "So my neighbor and I made amends. I took the first step by saying I didn't like having to call the sheriff on him, and then explained why. He said he didn't even think of the dogs. . . . He offered to come by and look at my light. . . With all the hate in the world, we must remember to be kind and talk to each other, even in our conflicts."

That's it – honoring one another, recognizing God's image in our neighbor – even when we are tempted to turn away, certain that we are right.

In this morning's New Testament lesson, Paul doesn't cling to the memory of his amazing spiritual experiences. He doesn't point to spiritual revelations he has received from the Holy Spirit. No, he boasts in his weaknesses, for God's grace and power are revealed right there.

Right there, even when we have messed up, God holds onto us and each other.

God, I expect, is glad our son or daughter is doing so well in school, but we cannot buy that bumper sticker, "My honor student is smarter than your honor student." God, I expect, delights in the simple joys we experience in life with our cat, but we cannot buy that bumper sticker, "My cat is smarter than your honor student."

No, we make ourselves at home with weaknesses, hardships, and calamities for the sake of Christ. We lean into insults, conflict, persecution and misunderstandings, because it gives us the opportunity to love our neighbor.

To love our neighbor, to catch a glimpse of God's image right there within them, to see the divine light reflected from their heart and soul.

Each other. It's such an amazing and unexpected gift. One another. It is the way we learn more about Jesus Christ at work in our world.

So go in peace – and love and love and love and love.