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Did Jesus Write A Song?

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Despite its mysterious origin, there is a song that has come to be called an American Anthem because it can transcend individuality and make people feel connected. It is a simple song about hope. It is sung by children, in churches of every Christian denomination, professional singers, even rap stars. Although it predates the Civil Rights movement, it was embraced by activists because of its simple, powerful, hopeful message that can unite both sides of any issue. To this day, it is still called upon to bring peace in potentially volatile situations.

It happened not too long ago, in 2018 in Charlottesville, VA, during a white supremacy rally. A group of people of all races, including many religious leaders and prominent academics, had legally gathered on the other side of the street from the rally and intended to stand in silence in peaceful protest. However, the white supremacists turned on the silent protesters and taunted them by shouting insults and threats. One of the organizers of the protest, the Rev. Sekou, an author and theologian, noticed the people who had showed up to protest were not emotionally or spiritually prepared to be verbally assaulted like that and were beginning to get anxious, angry, and aggressive. He realized if something wasn't done to change the atmosphere, things might escalate in a direction that would not be the peaceful protest he and other organizers had intended.

So, he broke the silence by beginning to sing the one song he knew everyone there already knew. A song deeply rooted in civil rights, in Christian religion, a song so simple and hopeful yet powerful enough to change the atmosphere. He began to sing: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,*

It wasn't long before everyone was singing. Not only did the song break the tension of the protestors, but the white supremacists also backed off. According to the Rev. Sekou, "they didn't know what to do with all that joy."

That is the power of the song, *This Little Light of Mine*. Although no one has ever been able to trace its origins, it is believed the song was inspired by the very Gospel reading we heard this morning, which I do not doubt. The song does what Jesus was explaining in today's Gospel when he talked about his followers being a light; it exposes things as they are while lifting up what they could be. That's the thing about light, it doesn't shine for its own sake, it illumines what is around us. Without light it is difficult to find what we want or need, it lets us recognize what is potentially harmful before we touch it, or if it soft. It helps us recognize who and what is around us. Light is both singular and plural at the same time, which is important for today's Gospel.

When we read or listen to today's Gospel and hear or read Jesus say the words, "You are the light of the world," we might interpret that Jesus is referring to us as individuals. We can blame the English language for that misinterpretation, because in the original language the Gospel was written in, the word *you* is not singular, it is plural. If more southerners had been involved in translating the Gospel, it might more accurately read, "All y'all are the light of the world."

The light Jesus was talking about wasn't like the single flame of a candle or beam of a flashlight; he was talking about how all his followers joining together to show love for God and their neighbors through what they say, and do, and even sing, can be like light by exposing God's love present in the world. When God's love is exposed, it can illumine our world in unexpected ways, like revealing things even the most divided of us have in common. Or revealing some beliefs like white supremacy for the evil they are. It isn't the light itself, but how it reveals God's presence and love that matters. That is what the song *This Little Light of Mine* is about and why it has endured for hundreds of years.

It is also a good way to understand the Church. No parish is light unto itself, nor is every individual member; it is our collective light, whether we participate in person or online, that can reveal God's love in the world. As wonderful and talented as each of us are individually, when we work together, we can be what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel.

Later today we will hold the annual parish meeting. I know not many people look forward to such events. Parish meetings are not fun nor are they entertaining, they aren't meant to be. They also aren't actual ministry to and with our neighbors, which is why some folks do not want to attend. Others do not attend because they fear there will be tension or anxiety over changes in the parish. The purpose of the parish meeting is to set things up so the parish can function as a light for another year by electing new people to serve on vestry and witnessing the budget the vestry approved. It's an opportunity to learn every parish has some basic necessities to attend to, even if they are not exciting. But these necessities might be appealing to some members and could be the beginning of an interest that might mature into participating in the parish in a new way.

The meeting is also an opportunity to express gratitude to people who have and do work hard in the parish, to learn about the past year and what we hope for this year. It is also an opportunity to pray together for each other as a whole. To realize we are not all there is, our light is part of the larger light of the diocese. And the diocese is part of the light of the National Episcopal Church, which can be both a comfort and source of encouragement.

Not everything we do is exciting, but it is part of being together, being a little light that we shine, just like the song says, into the world so the world knows it is not abandoned, that God is present, and God loves everyone, no exceptions.

Whether it is big or small does not matter as much as the light Jesus spoke of in the Gospel still shines.