

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Lose the Cape

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### Matthew 5: 14-16

I remember when I was in college I went to someone's house for a pool party. I remember it being pretty tame by college standards. The parents of the home were there! I remember the dad of the house being a really funny guy. We made jokes, laughed and carried on.

Later in the evening we were sitting by the pool and the father asked me what my major was. I told him it was religion. He laughed and said, "Yeah right." I said, "No, I'm serious. It is religion." He asked, "Why religion?" I told him I planned on being a preacher. He said, "A what? You don't seem like any preacher I know (I took that as a compliment). You laugh and joke and have fun. You seem normal."

Before I left the party he said something to me I will never forget: "I'm in my 50's and you are the first Christian I've ever met who didn't compel me to want to walk in the opposite direction."

I don't tell you that story because I'm the hero because believe me I've got a lot a work to do. I'm not always the hero in my stories! God is working overtime on me. I tell you that story because that man at the party is not alone. There are people everywhere who feel the same way and they have never had a positive experience of Christians in their entire lives.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary, as if he was recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to Church today, and am not depressed!"

Of course Ghandi was famous for saying, "I like your Christ. It is Christians I have a problem with."

Shane Claiborne is a radical Christian author who boldly writes how Christians have got it wrong. He reminds us that Christianity over the last few decades has become less and less fascinating. He says that we have given atheists less and less to disbelieve in. Christianity, he says, looks less and less like Jesus.

Claiborne is right. A recent study showed that the top three perceptions of Christians are 1) Judgmental 2) Hypocritical 3) Hateful. When most of the world thinks of Christians they don't think of Jesus, love,

sacrifice or even discipline. They think of people who are judgmental and hypocritical. Think about that for a moment. It makes sense why many people feel the way they do about religion.

I want you to know that for many people at work, in your neighborhood and community you are the only Christian they know. So, let me ask, "When people are around us, what do they think of? What impression do we make?"

The Bible is clear about the impression we are called to make in this world. Following Jesus is about one thing and doing one thing only: Love – receiving love and "doing" love. How can we miss this? Let's start with Micah, "**What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.**" (Micah 6:8).

Then Jesus came along and he preached the best sermon in history, The Sermon on the Mount. He said in Matthew 5:43-44: "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.**"

Then Jesus summed it up well with this: "**Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**" –Matthew 5:16

Now imagine if every Christian in this world (that's 2.2 billion people, over 30 percent of the world's population) would get up every day, read this verse and say, "Today I am going to let my light shine. With every person I meet, in every circumstance I am in, I am going to let my light shine." Could you imagine what this world would be like? It would be a different world!

Unfortunately, for many Christians it is "lights out!" They have turned out their lights by favoring judgment over grace, hate over love, rules over relationships, dogma over forgiveness, and despair over hope.

I remember eating at an IHOP one morning. I was sitting in a booth facing a window that looked out at the parking lot. I watched as a car pulled in to a parking space. A woman and man got out and they were fighting with each other. I could not hear what their saying but

their body language said it all. I assumed they were married because they were fighting like a married couple. Big deal. We all have our moments. But what was interesting about the lady is that she forgot what shirt she decided to put on that morning. Her t-shirt read "Christ is Alive at ..... Community Church." Well, there was something alive in that woman that day, but I am not sure it was Jesus! Be careful of the t-shirts you wear and the bumper stickers you put on your car! Be sure you are living up to their messages!

Jesus didn't say, "Let your bad attitude show that nobody in their right mind would want to be a Christian." Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others."

You know who understands this better than anyone? Children. They know to let their light shine. That's why Jesus said that unless we can become like children we will never enter the kingdom of God.

Brandy and I saw this message lived out when we were headed back to Florida from Atlanta a while back. We stopped into a pharmacy to grab some items for the road. We were in the checkout line when a grandmother and her four year old grandson walked into the store. Behind me was a big peanut "M&M" display. A yellow peanut "M&M" figure was holding up a big tray of the candy. The four year old ran to the figure, which was about the same height as him. He looked at it. Then he threw his arms around it and said, "I love you!"

The whole place lit up! Brandy and I laughed. The clerk laughed. All the people around us laughed. That child brightened the entire store! Walgreens never felt so happy. Kids know. "Let your light shine before others."

I believe this verse is one of the most important verses for us as Christians, because, unfortunately, Christians are known by a lot of things, but shining our light is way down on the list. Many Christians have forgotten to be the light! Have you? Now, I am not saying we have to be perfect but we as Christians need to be doing a better job at shining our lights.

I remember when I was serving another church a lady set an appointment with me. She was angry about something. Pastors love these appointments. She sat down in my office and said, "I have problems with some of your sermons." I replied, "Well, tell me. What's the problem?" She said, "You preach on love too much!" I said, "Well, before we go any further I want to suggest that you never say that to anyone else. You will not come across very well." She did not like that very well. She continued, "You preach on love too much. Where is the judgment? Where is the talk about sin?" I responded, "Well, I believe those subjects deserve study and attention, but last time I checked Jesus said that the world will know we are his disciples if we have love for

one another. And the Bible also says to let our light shine so we glorify our father in heaven. He didn't tell us to let our judgment shine.

When did Christians lose sight of the fact that we need to let our light shine? Tony Campolo tells the sad story from his high school days of how he failed to truly be a Christian. There was a boy in his class named Roger. Roger was gay. Everyone knew and tormented him for it. They heaped verbal and even physical abuse upon him. One day the abuse reached a crescendo. Five of the boys dragged Roger into the shower room, shoved him into the corner and urinated all over him. Around two o'clock the next morning Roger went down to the basement of his house and hung himself.

When they told Tony, he says he realized he wasn't a Christian. He knew all the right answers and sincerely believed all the right things and had lots of good moral practices. But Tony didn't live faith out when it came to Roger. If he had he says he would have stood up for Roger when the others were mocking him, he would have been a friend, and just maybe, Roger would still be alive today (from "Stories I Love to Tell").

When did we as Christians lose our light? When did we abandon our light? If you have lost your light, a great way to get it back is to reflect on what Jesus said right before our verse for today. Take a look:

**"You are the light of the world! A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."**

**-Matthew 5:14-16**

I believe one of the things Jesus is telling us in this verse is that our faith is personal but not private. Jim Wallis reminds us of that. There is no such thing as a private Christian. We are called to stand out! Jesus calls us to shine our light and love in order to point others to our loving God who is the source of all light.

I also believe Jesus wants our light to be attractive. The Christian faith is attractive. Our message is the most attractive message in the world! God created us, loves us and wants a relationship with us. He wants us to share his love with the world! What is more attractive than that?

Aretha Franklin understood the attractiveness of God's light and love. She died this week, as many of you know. She once said, "When God loves you, what can be better than that?" She was right. There is nothing better than that.

But there are a lot of people who don't know that love – who don't know they are loved. This is a cold and dark world and people are dying to see and feel our light. There are people who are wondering if the violence and evil around us is all there is. People desperately need love.

Growing up one of my favorite actors was Burt Reynolds. In the 70's and 80's he owned Hollywood and had the world by the tail. He was in about half the movies that came out! Many people know, however, that Burt has had his fair share of troubles in life. Drug abuse and relationship problems severely wounded him. He rarely makes public appearances anymore.

One night I was staying in a hotel and couldn't sleep. I turned on the TV and there was Burt Reynolds being interviewed. I couldn't believe it! What is even more amazing was that he was being completely vulnerable about the source of pain in his life. His story is heart wrenching. He said, "My dad never told me that he loved me. I would have given anything for him to tell me that he loved me but he never did. At the end of his life I thought he might say it, but he never did." Can you imagine?

There are people you come across every day who are starving for love and light. They may look like they have it all together. They may be smiling, but inside they are starving for grace, love and light. What are we going to do about it?

Let me ask you: If you are a Christian here today, are you letting your light shine? If not, why not? People are watching us. Folks who are not Christians are watching us wondering if our message has any credibility. Are we revealing the light of Christ? If not, why should they bother with our faith? They don't expect us to be perfect, but they do expect to see some evidence that the penetrating light of Christ is real. And how can they know unless we let it shine?

We all know Mister Rogers. There is a documentary out about him that is supposed to be phenomenal. When he was a little boy and would see scary news on television, like we have this year, his mom would sit next to him, put her arms around him and say, "Sweetheart, just look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping. That will make you feel better."

In a world filled with hate, judgement and violence, people are desperately looking for the helpers, the encouragers, the lovers – wondering if there is any hope.

Either we believe Jesus Christ is the help and hope of the world or we don't. Either we believe Jesus is the light of the world or we don't. Either we believe the light of Christ is within us or we don't.

Johns Creek UMC's light is strong and our community needs it. Our church is in a unique position to be a special light in this community. First, we have a wonderful location, don't we? We couldn't ask for a better physical location to let our light shine in our community. But, more than that, we have a spiritual and theological perspective that is very attractive. Our sense of inclusion and serving the community is powerful. I am reminded of this every time I look at our steeple. I live very close to the church, and whenever I leave my neighborhood I see our steeple and it reminds me of how powerful the light of Christ is within this church. All we have to do is let it shine.

Today's message is simple: Be the change you want to see in the world! I don't know who said that, but they were right! "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me!" Shine your light on someone this week. Encourage someone. Lift someone up. Write someone a kind note. Invite someone to church and take them to lunch. Call a loved one and tell them that you love them. Share your faith with a friend. Never underestimate the power of God's light within you. Booker T. Washington said, "If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else."

Have you ever seen the movie *The Incredibles*? It's about a family of superheroes who try to save the world from total destruction. In Bob Goff's book "Love Does," he writes about the superhero dad in the movie. He is an insurance claims adjuster, but he really wants to use his superhero powers, so he begins drawing pictures of the super hero suits he wants to wear. Of course, all the suits he thinks of include capes.

Well, the dad has a friend named Edna who makes super hero suits and she keeps telling him that he need to lose the cape. She tells him how in the end capes cause big problems for super heroes. They get caught on things like a jet engine or worse and cause big issues. Edna says in the movie, "No capes!" You get a lot more stuff done if you lose the cape. Bob Goff thinks Jesus agrees and so do I!

You know what I think will draw the world to Christ and leave a good taste in people's mouths about religion? When Christians lose the cape. So many of us who follow Christ do it with a cape representing something – a cape to be noticed by others so they will think we are so good – a cape representing something we are against or some judgment we have for certain people – a cape symbolizing what denomination we are part of or our views on a political issue or how we interpret the Bible. Soon we become known by our capes and not by Jesus. Our capes hide our light.

Another problem is that if we go around serving Jesus with capes, they eventually get snagged on something – our pride, other people's feelings, people's

perceptions of those who follow God. Our capes get in the way.

Goff reminds us that Jesus never wore a cape. Jesus hardly ever talked to anyone about what he had done, the way he loved people. He just did it. And all that mattered to him was that God knew it. When we lose the cape, we don't get confused about what our purpose is, which is to love. We don't forget that it is God who is making things happen. All our energy is channeled into doing great things for God and loving the world like crazy.

Let's lose the cape as Christians and just go out and share the light and love of Jesus. If we do, people won't say this world would be a better place without religion; they will say this world will not survive without the love of Jesus. When we serve Jesus without a cape people will want to know more about Jesus.



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