Title: “Find Your People, Find Your Light”
7/27 Sermon – 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 119:105-112
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 5:14-16

There are some things in life that you just cannot do all alone. Walking through the dark is one of them. When the road ahead is uncertain or unclear, and the weight of the world presses in and feels heavy, we find ourselves longing for direction, for clarity, or for someone or something to guide us. And in that longing, we often turn to Scripture. Today, we hear two powerful promises from our scripture passages that were read for us: From Psalm 119, the Psalmist declares, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” And from Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: “You are the light of the world.”

These are not just poetic words. Rather, they are reminders that even in the darkest places, God shows up lighting the way and calls us to shine that same light for others. God provides us with glimpses of light and gives us people to walk alongside us in order to reflect the light and love of God. We are not meant to do this journey of life and faith alone. When we find our people, we begin to find our light.

In a folk anthem titled, "Find Your People" by Drew Holcomb & The Neighbors, we are reminded of just how vital community is, especially in seasons of uncertainty or when the path ahead feels unclear. This song speaks to a deep, shared longing that we all carry, which is the desire for true connection when it says, “You got to find your people, ones that make you feel alright, the kind you want to stay up with all night… the ones that make you feel whole, that won’t leave your side when you lose control, the ones that don’t let you lose your soul.” It also says, “In a world of strangers, you don't know who to trust. All you see is danger, tryna find what

you lost. You can't go in alone, everybody needs help. You gotta find your people, then you'll find yourself." This song does not just describe a relationship; rather, it names a sacred kind of belonging. We all need the kind of relationships that this song describes, the kind of people who hold us together when we feel like we are falling apart, who show up without being asked, and who reflect the light and love of Christ in both the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.

I saw this kind of love and community most vividly a few weeks ago through our youth at the Montreat Youth Conference. There, love was the root of everything we did, woven through every worship service and keynote session, through the depth of discussion in back-home group time, and through the way our youth showed up for each other, especially youth who came with us and had never attended Montreat before. This love and this light also showed up in the simple joys of Montreat such as making friendship bracelets together, hiking Lookout Mountain, making midnight food runs to McDonalds and Cookout, exploring downtown Black Mountain, jamming to music, forming new bonds with people from other churches, and knowing that everyone in our group was truly known and truly loved by other youth and the adult chaperones of our group.

One of the most beautiful moments I witnessed at Montreat came in a small, quiet exchange between two of our youth. One of them had not been very involved before Montreat. They were new to the group, still trying to figure out where they fit. But over the course of the week, they were embraced by the rest of the youth. At one point, the song "Find Your People" came on. When it ended, one of our long-time youth, someone who's been to Montreat several times before, looked at the group and said, "I've found my people in y'all." There was a pause, and then the newer youth, the one who maybe was not sure where they belonged just days earlier, looked up and said, "Me too."

That is what the light of Christ looks like when it shows up in real life, when people see each other, welcome each other, and reflect the kind of love that says: You belong here. You matter, and you are not alone. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” And sometimes, that light shines brightest through the gift of community.

We here at SMPC are so blessed to have the community that we have, a kind of community that loves each other, comes alongside each other in time of need, and ministers to others. We should treasure the community we have built here and the ways we’ve seen God’s light in one another, remembering that none of us shines alone. Instead, we are a community of light-bearers. My light is part of your light. Together, we bring our individual lights, trusting that as a community, our shared light can illuminate the world.

Together, we shine God’s light into the world. This is not a solo calling; rather, it’s a communal one. We see this in Matthew 5 when Jesus was teaching both his disciples and the surrounding crowds that they were called, together, to be agents of God’s light in the world. When Jesus declared, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden” in Matthew 5:14, he was not speaking to religious elites or political powers. Instead, he was addressing his disciples and a crowd of everyday people who had become interested in his teachings like fishermen, farmers, mothers, widows, children, and likely some who had been cast aside by society. This context matters. The Sermon on the Mount within Matthew 5–7 is Jesus’ longest recorded teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, and it lays out the values of God’s Kingdom—values that turn societal expectations upside down. Just before this verse, in the Beatitudes, Jesus had blessed the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He was making it clear that the Kingdom of God belongs not to the powerful, but to all God’s people.

So, when Jesus tells them, “You are the light of the world,” it is a radical and inclusive affirmation. In the first-century Jewish world and all throughout scripture, light was a powerful and deeply symbolic image. It represented God’s presence, revelation, and guidance. It began with the creation story as it was through the very first act of creation that God spoke out over the dark and formless void, and said,“Let there be light!” The Jewish people knew the stories of God leading Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21), and they treasured the Psalmist’s declaration: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” he is not introducing a new concept, but rather passing on a sacred vocation that calls people to carry forward the mission of embodying God’s presence within a broken world. By the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, likely in the aftermath of the Jewish War and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish identity itself was in crisis. The Temple, once the center of religious and cultural life, had been destroyed by Roman power. Matthew’s community, likely composed of Jewish Christians, found themselves standing between two worlds: seeking continuity with Jewish tradition while also forging a new identity with Gentile believers in Christ. In that fragile moment of loss, transition, and rebuilding, Jesus’ teachings about being light would have resonated deeply. This text from Matthew 5:14-16 no doubt provided guidance for Matthew’s church in its relations with the Gentiles who were struggling with their identity and purpose. It reminded this community, which was surrounded by the dominant power of the empire and disoriented by the recent Jewish revolt, that their identity and mission to be the light, was still rooted in God’s covenant. The image of light offered not just comfort, but clarity and purpose for people learning to live out their faith in a radically changed world during that time period, and it does the same for us today too.

It's important to note that the word "you" in Matthew 5:14 is plural in Greek, meaning: "You all are the light of the world." This is not an individual calling—it's a communal one. As biblical commentator Douglas R. A. Hare writes, "The task of living as the light of the world cannot be accomplished by independent individuals; rather, it is one we must work at together."

When I think about the image of reflecting God's light together, I think of redwood trees that primarily grow in California and Oregon. Some of the tallest trees in the world, redwoods don't have deep roots. Instead, their roots reach out and intertwine with others. That's how they survive storms. Friends, we are like those trees. Our strength comes not from being independent, but from being intertwined—with each other, and with Christ. We were created for community, to live in relationships with each other. We are not meant to shine alone. We do not have to carry the weight of the world. We just have to stay connected, intertwined, in both presence and purpose. Sometimes our light will blaze. Other times, we will need to sit close to someone else's light until ours rekindles. And when we feel too dim to shine, too broken, or our flame flickers from grief, loss, fear, or doubt, we can remember the poem by Jan Richardson, "Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light." She writes:

> "Blessed are you
> who bear the light
> in unbearable times,
> who testify
> to its endurance
> amid the unendurable,
> who bear witness
> to its persistence
> when everything seems
> in shadow and grief...
> in whom
> the brightness blazes—
> your heart a chapel,
> an altar where
> in the deepest night

can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds."

We, dear friends, are the altar where God's light lives. God has placed a holy flame within each of us, and when we come together, rooted in love and community, that light grows stronger. Together, we reflect God's light into a world that so desperately needs it. And as we reflect that light, something sacred happens: our own identity as God's beloved children becomes clearer. We remember who we are, and how we are empowered to go forth and help others remember who they are too, which is seen, loved, valued, and cherished as the precious children of God that they have always been. Sometimes the most sacred thing we can do is simply sit with someone else in their darkness and illuminate God's light for them, reminding them of their belovedness. We can become the people who carry and reflect light when others cannot. We can become the people who see the beloved in others when all they see is brokenness. At Montreat, we were reminded of this at every worship service through the closing communal benediction response that was sung together, and went like this, "I am sending you light to heal you, to hold you. I am sending you light, to hold you in love." Friends, we shine most brightly when we reflect God's love together. Remember that when Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," it is not just talking about you, individually, but 'you all,' in a plural sense. It's a communal calling and it helps us understand that God's light and true community are inseparable. The song I mentioned earlier says, *"You got to find your people"* over and over again. And that's true because once we find our people, we find our strength, our purpose, and our light. when we begin to reflect God's light through our words, actions, and daily living, we embody God's

kingdom here and now, and we share God's love freely, weaving together a community of connection, compassion, and care. This is what it means to be the church. This is what beloved community looks like, people who choose to walk together treasuring the community that we have built and the ways we have seen God's light show up in and through one another as well as rejoicing in our shared experiences, holding tightly to the light that we have kindled together and seeking to share it with the world. It is the love and light of Christ that unites us as one family, no matter where we come from or who we are.

As we go forth from worship today, may we carry this light into a world that is so desperately in need of it by proclaiming hope, love, and renewal, and by letting the light that we have nurtured here together within this community continue to spark joy and transformation, wherever the path ahead may lead. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "The point of being the light of the world is not to draw attention to ourselves, but to what we are pointing to—God's presence, God's love, and the kingdom breaking in."

We don't have to generate our own light. The light of Christ is already here. The light of Christ is here for all of us, no matter where we come from or who we are. Together, we bear witness to the light of Christ that shines in each of us. Together, we bring our individual lights, trusting in God that as a community, our shared light can illuminate and change the world. So, find your people. Reflect the light of Christ. And when your light dims, let someone else's shine for you. It is through our togetherness that we reflect God's light—which unites us all. Amen.