

**August 28, 2016
John 1:6-13
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“Shining the Light”

Good morning! As you heard earlier, today is our report on Church of the Brethren Annual Conference which was held June 29 through July 3 in Greensboro, NC. I don't want to steal the thunder of our delegate, Jean Mann Graber, so I don't plan to talk about the business in my sermon, but I would like to tell you a bit about my sense of the worship, the Bible studies, and the spirit of Conference.

Moderator Andy Murray chose the theme, “Carry the Light,” which was the focus of the Mission and Ministry Board in 2015. It was a great continuation of that focus, and light and darkness are images we find throughout the Bible: beginning in the beginning when the words of God separate light from darkness, going all the way to the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation where there is no more night, because God is the light forever and ever. Every day started with light: not just the sun rising, which we have come to expect, but before each morning's business session we were lead in Bible study by the dean of Bethany seminary, Steve Schweitzer. Light was the focus of all of those studies.

The worship services focused on light as well. We sang familiar music and learned some new songs -- even a processional song which was written by music director Shawn Kirchner for this conference -- about light. Most of the preachers referenced the prologue of John; I chose just a part of it today. After John 3:16, it is the most familiar text in the New Testament. People who only come to church on Christmas Eve and Easter -- even if they skip Easter -- have probably heard it. The assertion that the ‘Word became flesh and that Jesus’ life is the light of all people and the darkness shall not overcome it’ has been part of every Christmas Eve service I can

remember. It is a beautiful, familiar passage, full of associations of singing Silent Night and lighting candles.

Like so many things which are beautiful and familiar, there is the potential for this scripture to no longer holding much meaning apart from the great memories of Christmas Eve and music and family and cookies. It was good for me to hear this text in a different context, to hear messages by excellent speakers who are part of the Church of the Brethren, named the darkness we live in, and proclaimed Jesus the light of the world. It is something which every congregation can take home and take to heart.

John doesn't mention the birth of Jesus in his gospel -- anywhere. This is not because John doesn't believe it or Jesus' birth isn't important, but unlike Matthew and Luke, John isn't so interested in the practical, physical details of Jesus birth--how did Mary get pregnant? How did Joseph feel about that? What did they do when all the inns in Bethlehem were full? -- John is interested in the theological implications of God becoming human: the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. What does that mean? I don't want to overstate this, but for Christians, that means everything.

Incarnation is the Word made flesh. To put it in less elegant terms, *carne* means meat, as anyone who speaks Spanish can tell you. The Almighty, the Divine, the Spirit became a piece of meat, just like the rest of us. Only he wasn't just like the rest of us: the divine spirit was in that human form as light. Light which was at the creation of the world and came into the world but that the world ignored and did not accept. This is really complicated stuff; the only way to get through this theological intricacy is to use a familiar image like light and darkness. Compared to Incarnation, a virgin birth is pretty straightforward.

The great thing about Incarnation is that even if we don't totally understand it -- and no one totally understands it -- it still informs our life together as the church of Jesus Christ and the Church of the Brethren. Every time we gather -- not just at Annual Conference, but every Sunday in congregations all across the United States -- we *are* the body of Christ; the physical embodiment of Christ in the world. And when we pray with Christians in Nigeria and connect with their

struggles and their hope, we are the body of Christ together: not two bodies, but part of the same body, called to shine the light of God's Spirit into the darkness which surrounds us.

I don't mean to make this sound too grand. Shining the light of Christ is the mission of the church, but it doesn't have to be a Mission with a capital M, a great, huge, international endeavor. The Friday evening speaker, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm made this suggestion as a way of shining the light of Christ:

Find a community in your area. Go to community leaders and ask them what their greatest need is, and how you might be able to help. Find another congregation in your district, preferably one who has opinions or convictions with which you disagree. Commit to go to your community together and work side by side in the name of Christ to serve those people and help with that need. That was Dawn's suggestion. Here's my suggestion: I'll let you decide if it's more or less difficult than Dawn's.

Look around at Creekside. See what needs to be done. Help however you can; work alongside your sisters and brothers in Christ.

I found out this week that not everyone processes tomatoes the same way. Some people use knives, some people use corers; some folks cut off all the tops before they core, some folks do both steps at the same time. It really doesn't matter how you get the tomatoes cored unless someone says, "I will *never* do it that way, and as long as so-and-so is in charge, I will *never* volunteer to help." That may sound a little silly, but I have heard statements like this from people -- not about tomatoes, but about other things at Creekside. These are typically things which involve money, or time, or both. Which is a lot of things, frankly. I will never do this, I don't believe in that, I can't work with them. This isn't unique to the church; disagreements happen in any group that's made up of people. Basically, if you can work only with people who agree with you on everything, you're going to spend a lot of time by yourself.

That's one method: don't do anything because people are difficult and there might be disagreements. Or, you can just stick with the folks you like, which is what many of us do. There's nothing wrong with

that; it the way most organizations function. But what if we as Christians are being called to something more in order to shine the light of Christ? What if we're called to practice working alongside each other the small stuff so that we've developed the capacity to handle bigger things when they come along? I don't know of anyone who has theological convictions about processing tomatoes -- if you do, you can talk to me later. But I know there are some strong feelings about how we spend our money: how do we plan? How do we budget? Who gets to decide? And feelings about how we spend our time: what projects should we support? Who's in charge? What is most important? Even when we all agree that it's important to give our money and our time to the ministry of the church -- I think most of you would agree with that -- if we disagree about how to do it, it's easier to bunker up, hang out with the people we like, and maybe talk some smack about the people we don't.

You can see how difficult this becomes if we have theological disagreements: if we don't cooperate on the smaller stuff, how can we have enough respect and trust to have a conversation about homosexuality or same-sex marriage? I believe that whatever our convictions are--about tomatoes on up to something more potentially more divisive -- the light of Christ shines when we work together as the body of Christ for the sake of the kingdom of God. If we let ourselves be defined by our disagreements, we will fritter away that light. But if we affirm that we are children of God, not because we are all the same, but because we have all received the love of Christ and want to share the love of Christ, then Christ's light will shine in us. We don't have to agree on everything -- we won't; we don't have to be perfect -- we aren't. It is a greater witness to the power of God that God can take imperfect people and use us to accomplish the work of the kingdom. Imperfect people are the only kind that God has to work with; imperfect people are the only ones who carry the light of Christ.

This passage from John about the Incarnation of Christ gives me great hope. First, it says that people are given the power to become the children of God when people believe in Jesus. Second, it tells me that God believes in people. God believed that his only begotten Son in human form could become the light of the world. As children of God, we reflect that light in the way that we live and work with each other, and the way that we live and work in the world. No one has

ever seen God, except for the only Son. As children of God, we can let the light of Jesus shine in us, so that others will see Him in our live and in our church. Amen.