

# *Walking in Light*

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This is a very special day for me personally, as Lynn and I come to you formally to join Emmanuel Friedens Church, and also as we welcome my son Luke and his fiancée Andi to visit. I have been blessed to have both my two sons and their partners in church with me two weeks in a row.

For a dad welcoming his children, and a partner welcoming his spouse, this day is pretty personal. Freddie Anderson brought flowers from her garden this week, to welcome us to church. But what she may not know is this is the first time Lynn and I have ever been able, since we married twenty nine years ago, to belong to the same church. That is because, to keep our ecclesiastical standing alive we have both had to have membership in our own denominations. Growing up in New England, where federated little churches in the countryside were a common sight, I have long joked about being a federated family. Today the federated family joins a federated church, allowing us to be together in a new way as members of the same congregation.

It has been a good week at Emmanuel Friedens in other ways too. All week long, as you know, by now, the church was busy! Over the week the children loosened up, and by Thursday they were singing with gusto! What a great little group of caring adults brought together the children—reflecting on the wonder and mystery of light...thanks to Charlie, and Patti and Ben and Faye and our youth assistants and all the adults who helped make meals....

Against this local lovely backdrop, many of us have had to deal with another reality, some distance away. We continue to pray and grieve the violence in Gaza, the death of many many civilians, women men and children. My friend Carl King, a Methodist preacher in North Carolina wrote to us to ask today to hold in prayer a young Palestinian undergraduate in South Carolina whom he knows—her family has been killed in Gaza—all but two sisters. It happened when their home was bombed. Grief knows no bounds: it is not Muslim, or Jewish or Christian.

As we celebrate my family, and this lovely community of faith and our care for children from this city, I also remember the family of one undergraduate and her inconsolable grief, which is inseparable from that of so many more....

We need more light in this world, and less violence. All week long our children have been discussing light, singing light and experimenting with light. Today I want to reflect rather personally with you on this topic of light, not from the angle of physics, nor of philosophy, but rather from the angle of experiential faith! What is this light?

In my experience faith's light is inseparable from the power of love. Every time we try to do faith's walk lovelessly we go wrong. Whenever we remember to live the truth that light comes from love, we experience an explosion of light.

Einstein proposed a simple mathematical relationship between mass and energy. Christ long ago proposed a less mathematical but no less real between the power of love and the light we need in the world. That may sound simple—even trite. But the experience is not trite, and the consequences are profound.

Light—the light that matters most—comes from Love. Seeing our children together this past week, I recently recollected a brief episode from my early childhood in India. When I was four, I heard the word God, yet again. Not surprising! We were living on a seminary campus. Rather than asking my Dad, the theologian and historian, what the word meant, I went to my mom. “What is God?” I can see her face yet as she said simply: “God is love, Peter.” And ever since, her words, quoting I John 4:16, have been reliable! I don’t know about you, but my most powerful experiences of light have been embedded in the experience of God’s love, a force more powerful than fear, shot through all of creation, radiating through the lives of individuals, experienced in family, experienced in community, even and especially the imperfect kind of local community we call church. We know God in this love—not a distant judge, but a power permeating reality.

This experience of light which is love, the love of Christ, is set against the backdrop of a world far too familiar with the opposite! You and I live in a world, a nation and sometimes in neighborhoods, where good people destroy each other, in the name of security; where cynicism and despair become the excuse for destruction and walls of hate; where greed tends to trump the common good.

For those of us who choose to live as Jesus’ followers, the light which comes from love is urgent business in need of reaffirmation. For we dwell in this world, which despite the sweetest window dressing is in desperate need of love.

For two thousand years, what Christianity has been, at least when we are at our best, is intentional little groups of people who band together and say—“We choose to live by love, to walk in the light—come what may.” And so one little community after another has given it a try. Each and every time it has been about the *intentional* decision to *walk together* in the light of God. It has been, to borrow a phrase of Mohandas Gandhi—a series of “experiments with truth.” And this is what the experiments look like. When some leave a challenged neighborhood we stay. When well intentioned folk engage in acts of random violence we will seek opportunities for considered kindness. When we are tempted to join the crowd and lock the doors we will resist the temptation and throw ours open.

What is this walk in the light? Over the centuries, sometimes it has been Orthodox, sometimes Catholic, sometimes Protestant. It has been monks in the desert and nuns in struggling cities. It has been Anabaptists sharing their property as any have need, and Catholic workers bringing the homeless poor into their homes. Sometimes—as when Mohandas Gandhi started Tolstoy farm, in South Africa, it has not borne the name of Christianity formally, but it has been full of the light of Christ! In Brazil, it is a tiny handful of churches I will visit in August, who work in partnership with the poorest of the poor, and insist on liberation and inclusion for gay and lesbian folk; over against the vast majority of the churches in the country. In Europe during World War II it was the Trocmes and others in Le Chambon, France, Huguenots, receiving and

hiding Jewish children in cooperation with American Quakers. In Palestine, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it has included groups of Christian peacemaking teams taking up residence in Hebron and elsewhere, as human companions to those faced by occupation's routine violence.

It is everywhere, in schools and neighborhoods, urban parishes and among rural migrant workers: there are no heroes, it is just you and me, staking our lives on the proposition that the equation between God and love and light is the source of redemptive power our world needs.

Since the time of Jesus, when we have really worked at following our teacher, it has been this way: three people here, twelve there, a hundred or two hundred over there—people who have covenanted together to say—we will walk in the light. We will raise our children in the light. We will bandage strangers in the light. We will offer hospitality to the fugitive—this is our light! We will speak out for justice and peace—in the light. And the light is the light of Love.

This is a very special day for me; it is one thing to serve a group of folk professionally—today I get to say that I am one of the folk in this place who are dedicated to walking in the light of Christ's love right here and right in this place.

We don't know where this lovely path will lead us, given the challenges of this city, this world, this time. But what I do know is that this is one deeply caring, deeply dedicated little community of faith. What I do know is that we do not walk alone—but rather in the company of those who have gone before us, and most critically in the company of the living risen Jesus. What I do know is that we will walk in the light! We will resist the seduction of fear. We will give witness to the power of a love that will not let us go, will not abandon humankind. We will raise our children well, in a path of prayer and kindness! We will practice mercy, radical hospitality, and a stiff-necked dogged pursuit of fairness.

It is a deep and joyful privilege to be walking with you today in this path of love, friends. May God guide us and strengthen us to support each other and hold each other up—in the light. And may we put into the practice the love we have received from Jesus, and from his witnesses who have gone before us. Today and tomorrow and tomorrow. Amen.