

**“The Light of the World”**

**John 8: 12-20**

**First Presbyterian Church**

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How do I navigate this life? That’s a good question for all of us. How do I know how to proceed in life? Where to go? What to do? More than that, How to get to the good life—authentic joy, security and fulfillment?

And that’s not just a church question. If you’re not a regular church-goer, the question applies to you too. It’s a human question. We all want to know how to navigate our lives so that they lead to fulfillment and happiness.

And we actually have some answers that we can turn to. Maybe you navigate your life by careful planning and extreme control. You know what’s next around every corner and you have the next 10 steps planned out all the time. Or maybe you live more by the seat of your pants and you navigate your life based on what seems fun next. You go with the flow and navigating is just really seeing where the tides take you. (That guy may even be sleeping on your couch right now!)

Maybe you’re the kind of person who navigates life by brute force. Your objective is to get more money or control or power than others and then use those things to direct the course of your life and those around you.

Or maybe you’ve tried all these. And they’ve left you empty. So the answer you’ve come up with is that there is no navigating. There is no map. There’s no fulfillment. There’s just despair.

I think most of us fall pretty well into 2 broad categories: The rule people and the freedom people. The rule people say that the way to navigate life is to learn the rules and then follow them. Simple. Whether that’s social rules, cultural rules or religious rules. The freedom people, on the other hand, say, “to heck with the rules. I’ll make my own.” I’m a freedom guy. I had a friend in Seminary tell me, “you’re the only guy I know who will willingly take a C just so that you can format the paper the way you want it to look.” That’s my bent.

What about you? How do you navigate life? Jesus is going to show us in this passage. And he's going to speak equally to both groups—the rule people and the freedom people. So let's all look at it and see what he has to say to us... [John 8:12-20]

It can be a little difficult sometimes to follow the line of reasoning in these passages, especially when we break them up like we have, so let me give you a little bit of background. Jesus is talking here to a group of Pharisees, who are the Jewish religious rulers of the time—the cultural and religious elite. And he's talking to them in the Temple in Jerusalem, which is the center of Jewish worship. And in case we forgot, he's doing all of this in the first century AD.

I say this because it's helpful to remember what *hasn't* been invented yet, especially as Jesus starts talking about light. Of course, there's no electric light bulb and no overhead lighting to just turn on. There's lamps that have to be lit, with oil in them. Around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century kerosene was invented and it revolutionized the world of lighting because it burned long and clean and cheap. Because until then, what you burned for light was almost exclusively the oil from some animal. Whale oil was great, but not everyone had a pet whale, so it was hard to come by. And historians will tell you that from about 400BC until about the 1850s, light was hard to come by and *really* expensive. The estimate is that a day's wage in 400BC would buy you about 10 minutes of light. That's about how it worked out. When kerosene was invented, that grew to about 5 hours. And now a days wage gets you about 20,000 hours of light. So in Jesus' time, a day's wage probably would buy you somewhere around an hour of light. That's pretty expensive.

But light, of course, was very important. If you wanted to see, you needed light. Really, if you want to be happy, you need light too. When I was in seminary, I interviewed for a job with a church in Portland. Great church. Great job. Good folks. And the pastor and I had gotten pretty far in our talks when I finally said, “so... tell me about the weather...” To which he replied, “well, it rains a lot... but there are lots of great indoor things to do, and everyone takes a lot of vitamin D, and does light therapy.” Light therapy... like it was just a regular thing to do!

But they do light therapy because they know that light is important. If you don't get enough of it, your skin turns weird colors and your body doesn't work and you get really depressed. Well, light was just as important to the people Jesus was talking to as it is to us, but it was much harder to come by.

And not only that, but when Jesus talks about light, he's talking about it in a very specific context. If you look back at chapter seven, you'll see that this conversation is a continuation of the conversation that he's having in that chapter. He's talking to the Pharisees and they are in the Temple, and John tells us that it's during the time of the feast of Booths, or the feast of Tabernacles. This was a huge Jewish feast that everyone from all around the country and surrounding areas would come to, and they would all gather in Jerusalem for a week and celebrate God's salvation, especially manifest in the Exodus from Egyptian slavery.

And there was a place in the Temple that had four huge lamps. And on the last day of the feast, people would come to this place in the temple and they would bring water from the pool of Siloam and pour it out and rivers of water would flow out of the Temple. Then they would light these huge lamps and bring in torches and start dancing. And they would light the lamps and the torches and the Temple would glow and shine its light to the whole city.

And they would sing. Loudly! They probably sang Psalms, which they would have been accustomed to singing. Psalms like, "The Lord is my light and salvation" (Ps 27) "Your word is a light to my path (Ps 119). And maybe they recalled the great pillar of fire that lit the way for God's people at night during the Exodus. Maybe they recalled that Isaiah had prophesied that the servant of the Lord would bring light to the Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth. Maybe they remembered Zechariah 14 and that the Day of the Lord's coming would be one of continual light and the promise of living waters flowing from Jerusalem.

It's in the context of all of this that Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." The light that is necessary for life. The light that is so valuable to us. The light that has been spoken about in the Scriptures for hundreds of years... the light that you have been waiting for... *I am that light. And if you follow me, you won't be in darkness any more.*

Let's ask our question again: How do you navigate life? Well, one thing we're learning is that whether or not you can see matters a great deal! Because trying to navigate in the dark is really pretty useless. If Jesus is the light of the world, then we are going to need him to provide that light for us.

Now, let's just be really clear about how this conversation should have gone. At this point, the appropriate response to Jesus would have been, "If light is so important and so valuable and we've been waiting for it for so long, then give us this light. We don't want to walk in darkness anymore! We're blind and we need you to make us see!" Unfortunately, that's not the response we get here. In fact, the response we do get seems a little odd. The Pharisees say, "you're bearing witness about yourself. You can't do that."

We need a little background on this one too. When the Pharisees tell Jesus that he's bearing witness about himself, they are using legal language. They have Jesus on informal trial here and they are asking him to defend himself. And they know the law really well. They are right about 2 witnesses. Deuteronomy 17 says, "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses the one who is set to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness." Then in Deuteronomy 19 again, "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense the he has committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall evidence be established."

And of course, the Bible is not alone here. Most every just legal system in history, including our own, does not let someone provide singular testimony. You have to have supporting evidence or multiple witnesses. You've seen this happen in the court of your own family... the name of your child shows up spray painted on the wall of a building. You go to that child and say, "did you spray paint your name on that building?" NO says the child, looking straight into your eyes. Really? How about we call the other two people who were with you and ask them what happened? "Well... maybe I might have done *some* of the painting..."

The reason it makes sense to have 2 witnesses in a trial and the reason you would never simply take the testimony of the accused only is because PEOPLE LIE! That's who we are. We're liars. We make stuff up to keep ourselves alive and in the best light. We deceive in order to make ourselves appear better. The Pharisees

know this about people and they are proceeding based on that. But there's a fatal flaw in their reasoning. Jesus isn't like them. They are asking questions according to their wisdom and their understanding—where's your other witness? Where's your father? But those questions are coming from the wrong starting place. The Pharisees are seeing Jesus as part of the problem, and they are seeing themselves as the solution. They began with the wrong assumptions and it's led them to the wrong conclusions.

In chapter 3 Jesus had said, “this is the verdict: light has come into the world but you have loved darkness more than light. So you hid from it.” In chapter nine, that we looked at last week, we saw that the ultimate in spiritual blindness is actually thinking that you can see when you can't. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they are the ones who are in the dark, even though they think they can see. The light has come into the world but you loved darkness, and worst of all, you think you can see in it. And the reason you can't see clearly who I am and the fact that I need no validation from some human authority is because you are in complete darkness.

So how do we navigate life? It matters greatly where your starting point is. It matters what your assumptions are. They drastically change the conclusions.

I think what Jesus says right here is especially convicting for the freedom people, like me. Because we usually start with our ability to set the direction for our own lives. Because we value freedom so heavily, we throw off all external constraints and rely on our own compass to guide us. But what we are seeing here is that we are born with a broken compass. And if we are relying on that as our starting point, we are going to end up way off. Freedom people start with the assumption that the difficulties in life are caused by too many constraints. The problem is that you are trying to control me and the solution is that I break free of that control and live by my own terms. But Jesus is saying that that's going to lead us to very wrong conclusions.

But what about the rules people? Well, that's actually who Jesus was talking to. The Pharisees are the epitome of rules people. Good folks. Very moral. Very respected. And very lost. They had rules for everything. And the function of those rules was ultimately to be right with God. Their view was that that ultimate good life was had by knowing the creator of the universe and that the way to know him

was through obedience to a set of rules. And they were right about the first but very wrong about the second. That's what Jesus is communicating here to them in verse 19... "you know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my father also." What Jesus is saying is that knowing God must include knowing Jesus. If your version of knowing God involves you learning how to obey all the rules and then presenting that record of obedience to God, then you are going to end up in the wrong place. It's not going to work.

So how do we navigate life? How do we find the good life? How do we find real and lasting value and significance and worth in this life and happiness in the life to come? Is it by creating a plan for your own life that starts with you in the center and is built on your own freedom and ability to navigate life on your own? Is it by creating a plan based on all the spiritual activity you will accomplish that will make God accept you? Is it about rules or about freedom?

What the Bible says, and what Jesus lays out here is that neither of those will work. Because both of those ways see us as the solution. Me. I'm either the one who will define the rules if I'm a freedom person or I'll be the one who can obey the rules if I'm a rules person. But the solution is me in both circumstances. And seeing yourself as the solution is really the essence and definition of sin. If I'm pursuing religious abandonment and unrestrained freedom, making myself the only lord and judge of my life, then I'm seeing myself as the ultimate solution. And if I'm trying to be my own savior by making my religious performance the basis for my salvation, then I'm defining myself as the solution.

But what Jesus lays out is something totally different. The Bible calls it Grace. The Bible says that we are called to a perfect standard by a righteous a perfect judge who has the authority to make the rules. So the freedom people are wrong. And it says that none of us are able to meet that standard, so the rules people are wrong. What the Bible says is that we aren't the solution, we're the problem. And we need both a judge and a savior.

How do you navigate your life? How do you find authentic joy and security and fulfillment? Jesus says here that you follow him. What does that mean? What does it mean to follow Jesus? Well, it's two major things—repentance and faith. Repentance is simply turning from your self-salvation and turning to Jesus. It's

recognizing that you are the problem rather than the solution. Whether you are a freedom person or a rules person, it's turning from freedom or rule-following as your salvation and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. It's realizing that salvation is not by freedom or rules but by Grace.

And then faith. Faith is simply accepting the wonderful forgiveness and the love that he offers and living by that alone. The glorious news is that Jesus has come to take blind people and open their eyes. To actually live up to the standard that has been set and then to take the punishment we deserve. To achieve what we could not and offer that record of righteousness to us.

If you've never done that before, let me invite you into that now. You can repent and turn to Jesus in faith even now. And if you already know him as Lord and Savior, let me invite you to do the same—invite you to cry out to him daily and ask him to reveal our blindness and to open your eyes. The Christian life is one of daily repentance and faith. Whether you are a freedom person or a rules person, Jesus is calling us to be Grace people. Those who were lost and are now found. Those who were blind and can now see.