

God illuminates the world with us.

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When I am stressed out, and taking myself too seriously, I sometimes listen to comedy. Several weeks ago, at just such a time, I caught a monologue by comedian Kathleen Madigan. In the monologue, Madigan recounts going to visit her parents, and describes walking into her parents' dark, barely lit home, which prompted her to ask her aging parents if they were having a *seance*. Her father responded,

“No, Kathleen. Your mother thought it would be a good idea at our age when our eyesight is failing to make the house as dimly lit as possible, because she’s upset that there are no more polar bears. So, your mom decided to replace all the lightbulbs in the house with low wattage, energy saving bulbs. You know what Kathleen? I am 69 years old. I live in Missouri. I have never seen a polar bear, and I don’t care if I ever see a polar bear. What I would like to see Kathleen is the coffee table.”

Last week, we completed our message series, “20/20 Vision.” A lot of churches in our area and across the country have seized the opportunity to use the year 2020 to emphasize the importance of seeing God, ourselves, and our spiritual lives more clearly. In today’s Gospel, Jesus reminds us that as we correct our spiritual vision to 20/20, we are also called to light the way for ourselves and others so that we can avoid tripping over metaphorical “coffee tables” that block our spiritual way.

Over the past several weeks, Matthew has been walking us through the preparation for and beginning of Jesus's public ministry. Just before today’s Gospel, Jesus gives his first sermon to his new followers. And, at the end of the sermon, he challenges them with the words we hear in today’s Gospel:

**SCREEN: “You are the light of the world...
A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.
Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket;
it is set on a lamp stand,
where it gives light to all in the house.**

**Just so, your light must shine before others,
that they may see your good deeds
and glorify your heavenly Father.”**

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God ask his first followers and he asks us today to illuminate the world.

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Each time we attend Mass, or our small groups, or listen to and share God’s word with each other, God illuminates the world with us. We also illuminate the world when we let a driver merge in front of us in traffic, or notice that a colleague at work is having a bad day, and take time to stop and listen; or, when we are patient with our children, when they are just not having a good morning, and “don’t want to go to school today.”

In doing these simple things, we light the world with God’s love. But, what if we could multiply that brightness even more?

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In sacramental marriage, couples receive a gift of grace from God which leaves an indelible mark, permanently transforming them. The two become one, and the light of Christ that shines in each of them combines to shine even more brilliantly in and through them.

Today, we observe “World Marriage Day.” World Marriage Day was started in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1981, when couples encouraged the Mayor, the Governor and the Bishop to proclaim Valentines Day as "We Believe in Marriage Day". The event was so successful, the idea was adopted by Worldwide Marriage Encounter's National Leadership, and the name was later changed to World Marriage Day. There are several Marriage Encounter weekends each year, all over the world. They are faith centered opportunities for couples to spend time away from the stresses of every day life to focus on their relationships, placing and keeping God at the center, and working on communication and respect for each other. My wife Cindy and I did Marriage Encounter back in 2006.

While preparing for this homily, Cindy and I talked about our Marriage Encounter weekend. We remembered how God was so present to us that weekend. I was a new FBI agent. Our kids were young. I wasn’t making a lot of money. We were struggling to stay focused on what was really important. Cindy wanted me home more, and especially wanted me to be “home” when I was at “home.” I was trying to get my career going. I had a couple big cases, and I worked all the time — including evenings and weekends. I agreed to the Marriage Encounter weekend, begrudgingly. I kept telling her that there was nothing wrong with our marriage; that every couple struggles. But, our light was definitely not shining brightly.

I will never forget the weekend. The morning of the first day of our Marriage Encounter weekend, I was assigned a new case at work and was really stressed out. A local company reported that a former employee had stolen millions of dollars of intellectual property and if we did not catch him before he gave it to a competitor, their company could go under. The executives I spoke with that morning were very worried. I almost canceled the Marriage Encounter weekend, but had promised Cindy I would go, so hesitantly went. We lived in Wisconsin, over two hours from the retreat site, left late and arrived late for the weekend. The whole time I could not stop thinking about the new case.

When our facilitator couple, Bob and Noreen, introduced themselves, something struck me as familiar. Why did I recognize Bob's name? Soon, the leaders called for a break, and we went to meet our facilitators. I asked Bob why I recognized his name? He did not know, but after a few minutes of questions, I realized that he was the CEO of the victim company whose case I was assigned that morning. Bob's company was facing ruin, and he was here with his wife to facilitate our Marriage Encounter. I could not believe it. When I told him I was the FBI agent assigned to his case, he was equally surprised. I immediately started talking about the case and apologized for lack of progress. I even started to explain investigative steps I had taken. Bob immediately stopped me and told me that we were not there to talk about work. He and his wife were there to help Cindy and I work on our marriage. Whatever else was going on could not be as important as my relationship with Cindy and our marriage. Suddenly, God and my wife Cindy had my attention.

That weekend, Bob and Noreen helped me and Cindy turn up God's light in our marriage. They reminded us that we needed to focus on our relationship, once again. It was a great weekend. Our marriage is not perfect, but we have now been married 28 years, and are fully committed to each other and to our marriage. I encourage you to check out Marriage Encounter. I have placed a link to the website (<http://www.wwme.org>) in my homily on the website, and this weekends bulletin has information about an upcoming weekend in our area.

There are a couple things I remember from that weekend that I believe helped my marriage, but I believe are good to remember for everyone. First, feelings or emotions are not "wrong." People feel the way they feel. So, it is not productive to question how someone feels about a situation, especially your spouse. Second, respect everyone. As a child of God, each person deserves respect, especially your spouse. These two things may seem obvious, but from personal experience, when things get busy and stressful we can quickly forget them.

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Just as Jesus challenged his followers in his first sermon, which we heard in today's Gospel, he also challenges us today to illuminate the world. For those of us who are married, he challenges us to multiply that light, and to shine even more brilliantly for each other and for the world.