

5 Epiphany.A.17

Matthew 5:13-20

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By the end of the Superbowl this evening, there will be stars—we will talking about talented individuals who score touchdowns, catch interceptions, throw the ball, kick field goals, form the defense and the offense and coach the players. We hope, of course, that most of them will be Patriots, who will bring glory to our city of Boston and upon their arrival home be feted with parades, rings, and numerous toasts in bars and pubs across the region. It's easy, I suppose, to see these individuals and our fair city of Boston as the topics of which our Savior speaks in today's Gospel lesson when he says: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." Yet (and hear me, please, for I don't wish to diminish the good works of a team for which I am rooting), I don't think these are the lights of which Jesus is speaking in today's Gospel lesson. Instead, I believe that when Jesus tells us to be the light of the world, this can be a status for which each of us (whether we can throw the ball like Tom Brady...or not) can reach—to be the light of the world—not stars, perhaps—more like flashlights. But I'll get to that later.

With this in mind, I would like to tell you about Bob Fletcher. You don't know Bob? He was a retired agriculture inspector in California. Still doesn't ring any bells?

Well, the truth is, I'm not surprised. Bob Fletcher died on May 23, 2013 at the age of 101. His obituary delivers the salient facts. Bob was born in San Francisco in 1911 (five years after the great earthquake when the city would still have been rebuilding), survivors included his wife, Teresa Cassieri, to

whom he was married for 67 years; their son, Robert Emmitt II; three granddaughters and five great-grandchildren. He raised hay and cattle on his land, was a volunteer fire fighter and still later, the fire chief in Florin, California, where he and Teresa lived. And then, there is this story which is far more illuminating about the character of Bob Fletcher than the other facts put together.

In the Middle of World War II, ignoring the resentment of his neighbors, (which was substantial) Bob quit his job in order to manage the fruit farms of Japanese families forced to live in internment camps. You may recall that after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States government forced 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the west coast out of their homes and into internment camps for the duration of the war. Clearly, it was not one of our finest moments in American history. At any rate, near Sacramento, many of the Japanese who were relocated were farmers who had worked land around the town of Florin since the 1890's. Mr. Fletcher, who at the time was single and in his early 30's, knew many of these people through his work inspecting fruit for the government. Al Tsukamoto, one of the farmers, approached Mr. Fletcher with a business proposal: would he be willing to manage Mr. Tsukamoto's farm as well as the farms of two family friends, and to pay their taxes and mortgages while they were away? In return, he could keep all the profits. Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Tsukamoto had not been close, and Mr. Fletcher had no experience growing the farmers' specialty, flame tokay grapes, but he accepted the offer and quit his job, and for the next several years worked 90 acres on three farms. Bob worked 18 hour days and lived in the bunkhouse that Mr. Tsukamoto had reserved for migrant workers. He paid the bills of all three families. He kept only half of the profits. When

the Tsukamoto family returned in 1945, they found that Mr. Fletcher had left them money in the bank and that his new wife, Teresa, had cleaned the Tsukamoto's house in preparation for their return. In truth, Bob was never much for celebrating his role in the war, and was keen to note that other Florin residents had helped their Japanese neighbors as well. In 2010 he said: "I don't know about courage...It took a devil of a lot of work." (PAUSE)

In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount which we heard this morning, Jesus says: "...let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." I think we could all agree that Bob Fletcher was one of the lights of his generation.

Some lights exist with the goal of bringing attention to themselves. For instance, when someone mentions Haley's Comet most of us think of the comet itself—not the light that it brings to the surrounding dark sky. In the human arena, I liken these types of lights to individuals who have dressing rooms denoted with their name printed upon the emblem of a star. These are the people with their names on the marquee—quite frequently we say "their names is in light." The focus is on them. We refer to them as the "stars of the show" and pay a premium fee to see them perform.

Then there are other lights that shine no less brightly in the darkness. However, these lights exist not so much for the purpose of bringing light upon themselves, but to offer guidance and hope to others. Rather than stars—think of them as....well... flashlights. Picture a flashlight. Its purpose isn't to shine light upon itself, but to illuminate something else. From what I have seen, I would say that rarely do people aspire to be this type of light. Instead, they rise to the occasion when the moment is thrust upon them—much as did Bob Fletcher, when posed with the moral issue of the internment Japanese-

Americans. Bob couldn't fight the government, but he could quit his job, he could preserve what had been in people's families for generations, he could be a steward, a caretaker, in the best sense of the word.

If offered the opportunity to be a star or a flashlight—give some consideration for opting to be the flashlight. After all, it bears more of the gospel imperative: being a light not in order to bring attention to oneself—but upon God. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.” In Jesus' name. *Amen.*