

Three Parables:
“Hiding Your Light Under a Bushel...”
Text: Matthew 5: 14-16

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Charlotte, North Carolina
August 10, 2008

We conclude our summer series on Thee Parables this morning with the smallest little parable in all the Bible: “Hiding your Light Under a Bushel.” In fact it is normally overlooked in most official lists. It seems to be a slightly scattered abbreviation of what was once a full-fledged parable of Jesus. For example, the unity of four consecutive verses in Mark, the oldest of the Gospels (21-25), is scattered all around in Matthew. Luke includes a part of the story, but he shifts the emphasis to the eye which is the lamp of the body, which needs to be filled with light. Some bits and pieces appear here and there in what we call “detached,” “floating,” or even “orphan sayings” of Jesus.

It is fascinating to rummage around there; but as my father used to say, “It won’t get you into heaven,” and it really does not matter all that much unless you are a seminary student and the Professor has asked you to discuss the origins of “The Parable of Light.” I assure you there will be no pop-quiz this morning.

Listen to it as Matthew tells it:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before others around you, that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.”

Matthew 5: 14-16

Luke revises it to say:

“No one after lighting a candle puts it in the cellar, or under a bushel, but on a stand, that all those who enter the house will see the light...” (Luke 11:33f.) And again, “No one after lighting a lamp, covers it with a vessel, or puts it under the bed, but places it on a stand, that it will be seen by those who enter.” (Luke 8:16f.)

According to the arrangement in Matthew, this would-be “Parable of the Lighted Candle” was part of the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount. Goodness knows, there was enough darkness around then; and there is more than enough now, so that the world needs all the light it can get. From the first page of the Bible until the last, God shines the light on his creation. Genesis begins: “The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. Then God said ‘Let there be light; and light there was; and God separated the light from the darkness; and God saw that the light was good.’” (Genesis 1: 1-3) Then near the end, with the last verses of the Bible in Revelation, Christ promises us that when life on earth is through, “There will be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God gives them light, and they shall reign forever and ever. Amen.” The “they” means “we.”

In Exodus, as they wandered through the wilderness of Sinai, God gave them a pillar of fire to lead them by night and a pillar of cloud and light to lead them by day. Isaiah later reassured them, eight centuries before Jesus Christ: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them has the light shined.” (Chapter 9:2). And my favorite in the prologue to the Gospel of John: speaking of Jesus, it says, “In him was light. That light shines in the darkness and all the darkness of the world can never put it out. (John 1: 3-5)

I.

The parable begins, “You are the light of the world.” How flattering. In John, Jesus told them that “He” was the light of the world. Now, with him gone, the light is transferred to us. “Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness will not overtake you. If you walk in darkness, you do not know where you are going. Become the children of light.” (John 12:32-36)

What all do you think he meant? A lot of things I guess. Mainly he was asking us to shine his light to dispel the darkness of the world. We get that mixed up. We begin to think that it is our light, our cleverness, our brainpower. We like for the light to shine on us. And there are all kinds of darkness. There is the darkness of the prevailing morality of our time, or the lack of it. Almost every day we learn of someone else who has cut corners, who has lied or cheated or stolen from others. The way to overcome that light is to shine the light of Christ’s purity on yourself.

There is the darkness of violence, which never goes away. There is the darkness of personal depression which perplexes everybody. There is the darkness of denial and disappointment that life does not give us what we want or what we think we deserve. Tolstoy said that “Life promises more than it delivers.” And Will Rogers quipped, “That’s the funny part about life: no body gets out of it alive!”

In high places and low and all the in between people compromise themselves, and others pay the price. Business leaders, politicians, clergy and others allow the tenor of the times to be their marching tunes.

Marriage vows are broken, as if they were temporary guidelines. I smiled at the cartoon in one of my recent ministerial journals. The Rev. Clergyman is performing a wedding ceremony. As the couple holds hands, he asks, “John will you take Susan to be your wife, to have and to hold, forsaking all others, as long as it is convenient, as long she fascinates you and as long as you get your way?” That might sound funny; but the vow says “For richer, for poorer, for better and for worse; in sickness and in health.” St. Paul wrote, (Men, are you listening?), “A man should love and care for his wife, and the wife her husband, and both for their children, as Christ loved his church.” Sounds tame. But what if Jesus Christ turned his back on the Church because he was disappointed by what we had done? What if Christ terminated the relationship because the Church people could not get along? No, we have such a little way to go together, go in peace and shine your light into the darkness of the world. You are the light of the world.

II.

But watch it: secondly it is more than personal and family. The parable says “You are the light of the World. When you light a candle you do not hide it under a bushel, you put it on a table by the window so that it gives light to all who are in the house.” It is the reflected light of Christ for all the people of the world. It is not an individualistic, pietistic, personal thing where we are trying to get ourselves into heaven; it begins with the here and now. “The Kingdom of God is at hand.”

In the months I have been here at Sharon Presbyterian, several people in the congregation have asked me what I notice about the Church, “Do you see anything wrong that we should work on?” Well, first I always say that I see a lot of good things. I tell that to everybody, everywhere. You care about each other. You enjoy being members. Peggy and I feel most welcomed.

Now it would be ungracious of me to tell you what I think is wrong with you. You might begin to tell me what is wrong with me! I will promise to prepare a thorough report in writing and slip it under the door as I leave for the last time. But I will share some things which I see as I study churches all over the place. Then, as my Dad used to say, “If the shoe fits, wear it.”

Normally the number one thing which stands in the way of a Church shining the Light of Christ into the world is that the church members and staff think and act as if it is their church, that it belongs to them. I mean, as if the church buildings and property and activities and programs and worship were meant for them. Technically, if you understand Presbyterianism, that is not even the case, legally. But I mean it more from a philosophical point of view.

I hear a lot of echoes all the time which say, “It’s all about me: this is my church. Here is what I want. Some might consent that others want what they want too; but the others come after me.” I see people taking ownership of this program or that space or this facility or that traditional way of doing things and they are not willing to let go. (That’s a little harsh maybe, but I say it intentionally, trying to answer the question.)

The first thing we have to remember is that Christianity and our devotion to the Church isn’t all about you and me at all, or even all about us. It is about “We”; but the “we” includes all the people of our community and more, all the people of the world: “You are the light of the World.” How do my presence and my program and my predilections fit into the larger scheme of things? And more than that, what does Almighty God wants us to do and be?

At our Session meeting the other night, Elder Rock Boyle opened the meeting with a meaningful prayer asking that God guide the Session to be open to understand that we are in God’s house and that it is his will and way we seek, not our own. I think the prayer was answered in the ensuing deliberations.

I just finished reading a wonderful book which our Associate Pastor, Ron Nelson shared with me, called Christianity for the Rest of Us, by Diana Butler Bass. It is a marvelous book about the changing fortunes of the American church. Diana used to teach at Virginia Theological Seminary and now is at the University of California. She acknowledges that the mainline denominations are in trouble, as everybody knows. But, as she studied congregations of traditional churches all around the nation, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, she came across dozens, even hundreds of them, which were prospering, growing in membership and in their service to the people of the world.

She admitted that the days of denomination supremacy seem to be over. Christianity has moved over to non-denominational stations and community places. God is not concerned, as our forefathers thought he was, that we be primarily good Presbyterians. He wants us to be good Christians.

But God is not finished with us yet. We do need to change and adjust and try to discern the Word of God for the coming days and decades. But meanwhile, there are good models and patterns to follow all over the place. She found Ten Things these congregations have in Common. The first she calls hospitality: they were openly reaching out to have others come and share with them in ministry and mission. “The doors were wide open for all to enter.”

The second characteristic of ten was that they believed their Church belonged to The Lord God, and they continually sought to find a course of action in which they could share his love in Jesus Christ. They were continually seeking new ways to be the church. They were able to shed some of the old ways. Konrad Lorenz, the great student of animal behavior, once wrote that “He tried to give up a pet idea each and every morning of his life.” Most of the good Christians I have known in my ministry refuse to give up one a decade. You have to learn to let go, and let God do his work.

An obedient congregation needs to revere its past - that is the source of its traditional strength. Someone needs to stand up for those who have served well and are growing older, or who are already gone. But you cannot live on the past. Someone also has to stand up for the youth of the church and the youth of the land, and for young couples and their families, and for the myriad of new members who have not yet come. It does not matter what you or I like; it matters that the program or worship will best touch the lives of those in the world around us. The power-makers in any congregation need to be deeply committed to the present.

But they must also be committed to tomorrow. What is done should be weighed on the scales of what God is trying to accomplish. In the book, it was suggested that at every congregational meeting, for example, on every important vote on what a church should do next, there should be someone there who casts 100 extra votes in favor of those who are not yet here, but who should be and could be and one day will be. Amazing. I had never thought about it before. Those who have not even arrived should get to vote on what is done. But since they are not present yet, someone has to carry the ball for them. Learning to let go is hard; but one day you will have to let everything go. It just might be that God is asking you to practice how to do it.

In other words, our plans and purposes should be measured not on our scales, but on the giant scale of God himself. The church of Christ is not a museum, however grateful we are for the mementos of old. The church of Christ is a living entity. You can be sure that Jesus Christ is out there ahead of us, beckoning us on to meet him there. We are to be the light of the world. The candle of Christ is not meant to be hid in some sacred corner of the inner sanctum; or under the tables in the old Fellowship Hall. It is to be put out there for all the world to see. That’s what light is for.

III.

Thirdly, the parable says that we are to let our light shine, why? - so that people seeing it will give glory to Almighty God in heaven. We are supposed to tell others of it: the Good News of the Gospel is to go out to all who need it. I came across a book not long ago in my library, Flags of our Fathers, by James Bradley. Perhaps you have read it or have seen the movie directed by Clint Eastwood. It is the touching story of the six Marines who raised the American Flag on a make-shift pole, atop Suribachi Mountain on the Island of Iwo Jima in late February 1945. A Memorial Statue stands near Arlington Cemetery in our Washington DC. The photograph was snapped by an Associated Press photographer Joseph Rosenthal, who by the way was rejected for military service so he went to battle with his camera. He died two years ago. The book was written by the son of one of the men who raised the flag.

Three of the men in the photograph lost their lives on the Island as the battle for Iwo Jima raged on. They never got to come home. Two others, who did return, succumbed to the aftershock of the horrors of war and soon died of heartbreak and alcohol and other things. Only one led a normal lifetime, in a small town in the great state of Wisconsin, John Bradley, the father of the author.

The senior Bradley always refused to speak of the incident to the Press, TV, to his priest and even to his family. No copy of the photograph was ever hung in their house. It seemed as though his story would go with him to his grave. He hid his light under a bushel. But, when he died in January of 1994, his children found two boxes of memorabilia from the War and out of that James Bradley got started on his book.

I mention it here today partly because it has been on my mind; but more because it is similar to a pattern of feigned secrecy I see and hear among the people of the Church. Mr. Bradley of course had the burden of war memories to contend with: it was probably too painful for him to talk about. I have seen that, many times.

But, we proper Presbyterians do not have that excuse. All we have to fight against is our decorum, our model of dignity, the proper way to do it. I have heard it for 45 years: “Oh, we don’t want to go rapping on doors and bothering people at lunch or on the street corner as some of the fanatical Pentecostals and Baptists and Mormons do. That would make us look silly.” And there is nothing worse than looking silly; except that, remember (?) St. Paul chided the Corinthians when he wrote: “We,” meaning St. Paul and his friends, “We are fools for Christ’s sake, while you are such sensible Christians.” (I Corinthians 1) It was not a compliment; it was a criticism that they did not care enough to take the risk of looking foolish. Most tend to say, “If people want to come, let them come. But let’s not recruit, or act like we need them.”

And that’s fine too; if that is what you want. This church could go on almost forever just as it is. Until you realize that all those lonely people within walking distance from here need the love of Jesus Christ, which, glory be to God, is ours to give.

A man you might know called me since I have been here, and asked me how he could get to heaven. Great question: Charles Wesley said it was the only question worth asking. “What will happen when I die? Please tell me,” he said. He told me that he was growing older and he had heard all the stuff preachers say; but he was fearful and he wanted to know what he should do. I asked, “You mean you have been going to church all your life and you still do not know how to get to heaven?” He looked back, puzzled. I told him, as best I could.

Christ commands us to share his love and ours, our Christian education, our fellowship groups, our church suppers, his message and our/his worship. Many tell me that they love their church the way it is: comfy and cozy and uncluttered with outsiders and all their endless problems. “We need to take care of ourselves. We need a place of refuge,” one member told me, “I like being around people that I know and can trust.” You know, I have come to love it too. It is peaceful back here off the road. But while self-sufficiency is highly valued in the world around us, it isn’t worth a farthing as a value in the Christian Church. We are not supposed to be self-sufficient. We are supposed to be dependent on Him. Without the power and peace of Christ to guide and guard us, we would all be goners. It should be “All about ‘We’.” – We the people, all the people. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but should have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) It does not say he loved the Church so much he sent his son.

Sherwood Eddy, the well known Missionary and Christian Scholar of a century ago, in one of his books told the story of a peculiar custom in old China, not far from Beijing where the Olympics opened with fanfare the other night. Back then there was just a narrow pathway, navigated on foot, which led through the woods and on around the turns and twists up the hill to a lovely little village. Dr. Eddy said he noticed that the villagers attached a small candle to the front of the sandal. Peculiar. He thought it was for some ceremonial type of dance or celebration.

It turned out to be quite sensible. In order to travel up the path, while carrying supplies and food and necessities, it would be self defeating to use one whole hand to carry a candle. But with the lighted candle out front on their shoes, both hands were free. They could carry their things and still avoid the rocks and precipices or fallen branches or snakes and wild life along the way. Clever people, those villagers, he declared in admiration.

But then Dr. Eddy noticed something else, which brings him to our sermon. The clever placement of the candle light on their sandals helped them to see their way up the path, but (Are you listening?) even with it lighted, they could not see more than a step or two ahead. The candle-light helped them to see, but only one step at a time. Until the other foot moved forward, the darkness still prevailed. It says something about trust.

Got it? The kindly light of Jesus Christ will also lead us forward, one step at a time. When John Henry Cardinal Newman was out in the Mediterranean Sea, trying to get back home to England, he took ill and had to wait weeks before they could set sail. Then when they got on board the boat, the wind dropped and for two more weeks they sat in the Straits of Bonifacio off the Italian Coast. Depressed and discouraged and longing to be home, he used the time to write his magnificent hymn, *Lead, kindly light*. I would have had us sing it, but it was omitted from our hymnal. Perhaps you know the first stanza:

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

Conclusion

Let me close it with a story. Way back when I was a skinny young teen-ager – I know it is impossible to believe that I was ever skinny, but I was – I had a paper route, i.e. I delivered newspapers to peoples' homes, on foot, not riding around in a car, tossing them out, as they do nowadays. Back then they published a bulldog edition of the Sunday paper which came out Saturday night. To keep everybody happy, we delivered it. In the winter time it was dark by the time I ended. And not being brave by nature, then or now, I was scared to death. It was a rough part of town and one night I got mugged and robbed of what little money I had.

Then, on a Saturday evening not long after, off I went again down Hillcrest St., over to Colombo and on down Atlantic Avenue to Broad and Dearborn Streets which was the area which frightened me the most. The bulbs in the streetlights were usually knocked out by stones and it was dark that night. And sure enough loitering there at the next corner was a group of ruffians I had to pass.

I was ready to turn around and go back up the street and circle around from the other side. But I noticed this huge person coming out of the dark alley with a flashlight in his hand. I couldn't see who it was and I was sure I was done for and I didn't know what to do. There was no where now to go. As I turned to run –

Praise God! – I heard a voice - the sweetest possible sound in all the world. I heard, “Don’t worry Rich, it’s me.” It was my Dad. For all those weeks since I had been mugged, my mother told me later, he sneaked out after me and followed me around my paper route, giving me the dignity of doing my job, but backing me up so that if I ever got in trouble, he would be there. He always told me, as I tell our children: “If you ever need me, call and I’ll be there.”

I am a Grandfather now. My Dad’s been gone for 25 years. And I surely am not skinny little teenager anymore, with time galore ahead of me. But I want to reassure you who listen to me today, that everywhere I walk, and anytime I am in trouble, and every time I have had to wander through any kind of darkness, I still carry that image and memory of the One who is tracking behind me on my journey with a light in his hand to guide me home. Like in Holman’s famous painting, “The Light of the World”, where Jesus is standing in the shadows, waiting for me and you outside the door, with his lantern lighted and ready.

And whenever I get weary, or puzzled, or sad, or stare in disbelief at how swiftly time has passed, in whatever darkness, I always pause and listen for the voice which still whispers: “Do not be afraid, don’t worry Rich, it’s me.” Like Jesus said to the disciples in the boat as he came walking to them on the water through that storm in Galilee, “Take heart, have no fear, It is I.” Everything is going to be OK.

The light of Christ shines in the darkness, and all the darkness of the world, can never put it out.” (John 1:5)
You are the light of the world, for now, and forevermore. Amen