

“Prophets of a Future Not Our Own”

Luke 8:16; Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22
(Jesus’ parable about letting lamps shine for all to see)
Stewardship Sermon

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Jesus used imagery from the *every day life* of people when he told this parable of the lamp—the parable that we just heard in slightly different versions from three different Gospels. The people he spoke to would light a lamp and put it on a stand if it was night time or dark. [Put lamp on pulpit edge] The purpose of putting the lamp on a stand was to illumine as much as possible.

We don’t think of Jesus as a humorist very often, but this is really a funny parable! Jesus points out that people do not cover their lamps with a vessel. [Put container over lamp] That’s silly. Nor do people hide their lamps under something. That would be both dangerous and laughable. A light is *meant to be* on a stand so that it can illumine as much area as possible!

Jesus used imagery from the every day life of the people to whom he spoke. *Our every day life* does not usually include oil lamps. We turn on light switches if we want to see at night or when it’s dark. [Get flashlight] Or, we use flashlights. I brought a flashlight with me today, to help me see the notes here on this stand. I’ll just turn it on now to help. Gee, it’s hard to hold and gesture at the same time, besides, you all might be distracted by my holding it, so I’m just going to place it over here. [Put flashlight on the pulpit edge, so it shines in the opposite direction.] There. Hmm, now it’s not lighting up my notes. This makes me think about what Jesus’ parable might have been had he told it today. He might have said something like this: “We don’t aim a flashlight in the wrong direction; we aim it so that we can see.”

John and I went to a concert when we first came back to California a little over 5 years ago. I felt a bit out of place, and I’m sure John did. It was a Dave Matthews concert. Our teen-agers had liked Dave Matthews, and I was suffering a little from the Empty Nest syndrome, so I wanted to go. I like some of Matthews’ band’s early mellow and romantic music. However, that night the band did not choose any of those pieces. Instead, they had a pretty loud and bold sound, in the Home Depot Center. John said he managed to understand *one* word out of the entire concert, “Love.” He caught that word only because it was projected on the overhead screen. We were, quite frankly, amidst a much younger crowd in this open-air venue.

Right next to us were some considerate young adults. I say considerate because the man right next to me kindly asked, “Do you mind if I light up?” Even 5 years ago I was fairly naïve. I *thought* he was referring to a cigarette . . .

“Do you mind if I light up?”

“Do you mind if I light up?” In a no-public smoking world that’s a phrase we do not hear much anymore.

Yet, sometimes we sort of say that, feel that, wonder that, about the very lights that have been kindled in our souls, in the depths of our being—the very lights

that help to define who we are, that give us our identity as God’s children, that are our gifts to the world. Sometimes we are introverted about placing our lights on a stand. We do in fact hide our inner lights. This parable of Jesus is quite humorous, and sometimes *so is our behavior*.

It’s the nature of a match to light up, a firefly to flicker, and a lighthouse to shine very far out to sea. It’s the nature of a laser to focus intensely on a small area.

We each are lights of some kind, with some purpose. It’s our nature.

The primary function of light is NOT TO BE SEEN, but to *let things be seen!* Yet, we are sometimes bashful, worried that if we let our lights shine, *we* may be seen, or others may think that we desire to be seen—when we’re simply radiating the gifts God gave us.

The primary function of light is NOT TO BE SEEN, but to let things be seen!

Since we just moved to Redlands a couple months ago, John and I have been putting our house into order. I realized in the midst of unpacking that we left one particular light in Orange County, so we had to go purchase another one here. It’s a very special light. You plug this light into a light switch, and it does *not* go on. Its purpose is to turn ON if the power goes OFF! Interesting, huh? The light perceives when the electricity goes out, and then uses its own battery to light up—to help you see in the dark if the electricity goes out. It’s easy to forget this kind of light, even though it is very important, for it only rarely goes on!

The primary function of light is NOT TO BE SEEN, but to let things be seen!

There are hundreds of different kinds of lights to help lots of things be seen under extraordinarily different circumstances. All are needed.

Jesus wanted his disciples themselves to teach and preach, not just to follow him or his light. It was all right with Jesus if in their personal lives the disciples were extroverted or introverted, but Jesus told them that they needed to be active in letting their light shine. They did not need to *generate* their own light—any more than salt has to *try* to be salty. It is the nature of light to shine, and it does—unless our behavior is laughable, unless we hide it or cover it.

It’s not our own glory if we can sing in such a way so as to evoke faith, if we can visit a sick person in such a way that they feel cared for, if we can lead a committee in such an organized way that lots of vital work gets done, if we can lead a small group so that people connect with each other, if we can invite someone to an event because we think they could benefit, if we can deliver food or help build a house or speak another language to build bridges. It’s not our own glory if we can do any of these things—it’s the glory of Our Creator—God...and our letting our lights shine helps this Light of God to be seen.

This parable, which is in each Gospel, is a death blow to religion that is purely personal or private. It may be okay to go into our closets to pray, but we are to come out to shine—whether our light happens to be like a match or a spotlight.

Our lights shine now for the world that others live in—the world of the “next” moment, the “next” day, the “next” generation. Think about it, *this redefines what we mean by the “next world”!* Every time we help someone learn to read, get through a crisis, reconcile with a friend, break a harmful practice, have enough money or food to survive—we’re helping the “next” of that person—the “next world” for them.

Letting our lights shine is not sacrificial. *We glow when we glow!* This is what is so cool about how God created us all. When we most help others, we ourselves are glowing!

This funny parable of Jesus regarding lamps is really a remake or a take off from a common proverb that circulated around Galilee: “Nothing can be kept secret for very long.” The point is that sooner or later, a secret will get out. Another version of the proverb is: “*A secret is something you tell one person at a time.*” [Repeat?]

Jesus prods his disciples: Don’t keep a secret about God’s love, God’s grace, human’s capacity to love each other as brothers and sisters. His plea is simply this: LET GOD’S LIGHT BE SEEN!

God does not just give individuals lights that Jesus told us not to be silly about by hiding. God gives communities lights as well. Redlands First Church has been a light in this town for over 130 years. This congregation has illumined the lives of those who were starting families and wanted a place to connect with other families, those who wanted to learn about the Bible, those young adults who wanted to meet other young adults. This congregation has illumined the lives of children, youth, and those who seek beauty in the fine arts. This congregation has illumined the lives of those who are healing, who are grieving, and those who are hungry on many levels.

I would describe the kind of light you have been and we can continue to be as a BEACON—a very big light in and for this community, a light that communicates, “Come here, we’ve got something for you.” Redlands First Church is big and bold and dramatically points the way to God’s grace through human hands and hearts.

Our estimating our personal giving for 2009 and our communal budget-planning deals with nitty-gritty issues of money. The money in some ways seems insignificant when we compare it to Love or God’s grace. However, obviously we need to deal with money to keep our physical beacon plugged in! Most of the time, our money and giving are background to our ministry here. Right now, these few weeks, it is foreground, for we need to give enough so that we can be collectively what God has given to us to be, so that we are not collectively being silly or humorous by hiding our ministry under a big bushel basket.

You have a gift in your bulletin today, on parchment paper. It’s a quote from Archbishop Oscar Romero. God transformed Oscar Romero into a *flood light* for justice in El Salvador. His words and actions managed to illumine the plight of the poor, so their situation could not be ignored.

Romero the reluctant prophet said,

It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.

No visit brings wholeness.
No single program accomplishes the mission.
No set of outcomes includes everything.

This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something and do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference between the
master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

—Oscar Romero

Have you ever gone out to the desert or up to the mountains where it is very dark at night and turned on a flashlight, [pick up flashlight from beginning of sermon] aiming it up into the night's sky? The beam goes out and out and out; you cannot actually tell how far. Consider how far up and out your own light shines. All that you've done to let your light shine continues to light up the universe. Likewise, the light of our church's beacon goes out and out, farther than we sometimes realize. We may never see the end results of our letting our lights shine, as individuals or as a congregation. We may not even know that someone else has been blessed by our behavior. Yet every single one of us can be a prophet, and Redlands First Church can be prophetic.

We are prophets of a future not our own.