

## **“We are the Light, Not the Shadow”**

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 11/10/19

*Matthew 5:14-16*

*“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

“The falling rain beckons me into the Earth’s core  
Pulling me into the ground, until I feel the heat on her floor  
And then it comes crashing in, like a violent wind  
A sacred thought hinging on a single blend -of human story, earth’s story, and divine illumination: We are the light, not the shadow.”

This was the start of a song I was writing that ended up being a short poem, or perhaps more simply stated: A moment of personal insight. I have scraps of paper filled with such things from here to eternity, where I have jotted down diddies and lymricks, haikus and incoherent ideas that I hoped would eventually be born out in articulate, deeply communicated song or rhyme. However, I think this one gets to the heart of what for me has become a powerful truth: We are the light, not the shadow. For so many years I had preached that light and dark cannot co-exist. In fact as a young ministry student, before we were even married, Ruth witnessed me preaching one such sermon for one our college classes at the university, a class on the letters of St. John. I preached on light and darkness, cleverly switching the lights on and off as I proved to the class that light “cannot” possibly be on and off at the same time: “See?” Yet, the most intriguing part was when I pulled out an overly ripened, in fact “black” banana and peeled it in front of the class to reveal that there was not a single dark spot on it – like a magician performing a magic trick. My point of course was that even if darkness is our exterior, light might be inside. I was a risk-taker! That banana could have been bruised and black on the inside too, so the professor gave me extra points and invited me to preach at his own church the next Sunday.

In those days I was convinced and somewhat obsessed with the idea that light and darkness cannot co-exist and we must diligently rid ourselves of every dark spot in our lives: Namely, sin. However it wouldn’t be for another decade before I realized there were more relevant questions to ask. Rather than “can they light and darkness co-exist?” I would learn to ask, “Who or what is the light and what does it do?”

Light has properties, scientifically, electronized energy, and there seems to be no limit to brightness. Light can continue to become brighter and brighter. Light emanates and has observable effect on so much. Light interacts. Light gives life – as we see in our sun. And light reaches, light extends into the universe – light travels and is received. In this way it is quite interactive. However, darkness does none of these things, because it really isn’t a “thing” at all. We love to allegorize it and even personify it but in reality darkness is not energy or electrons. It is in fact simply a descriptor for when there is no light. Darkness is simply the absence of light. But there are interesting aspects to it, and the “silhouette” is one of them. How many of us played shadow puppets as kids?

Well, Plato keenly played off of this aspect of shadow in his “Allegory of the Cave.” He told the parable of the prisoners chained in a cave who were forced their entire lives to stare at a wall. People would walk by the cave all the time and the fire behind the people would illuminate their bodies and the objects they carried. The prisoners could only see these shadows, and for them they represented reality outside the cave. Because it was all they could see, for them, the silhouettes were the realities they knew and 100% expected to exist outside of their little, miserable world. However, when one of the prisoners escaped, he was baffled and in disbelief when he found humans outside the cave – and the shadows were not reality at all, but simply a distorted view of it. He couldn’t believe it at first, but with time was drawn to the power of light from the sun. He wanted to learn more. This idea is indeed a powerful one. Many of us are in the same boat spiritually. We came to some grand epiphany of sorts: The reality we once perceived to be true was discovered to not be true. In our crisis of belief we found ourselves seeking truth, and somehow our journeys for Truth led us all here—and now we get to travel together a bit. But in essence, we discovered the shadows are not exactly reality, and then when we got to the other humans too, and were pretty special- but then we discovered the sun, and now we want to proverbially speaking “see the source” of the sun too. We are on a path, metaphorically, of digging deeper into our beings, into the source of it all: That is, we desire to know God.

Light is a fascinating theme for many religions, but as followers of Jesus Christ we are especially drawn to diving deeper into this profound concept: “You are the light of the world.” Not the sun, not the candle, not the stars, not the moon, not the campfire. *You*. That’s right, you. You’re the light. Not just any light... the light of the world. That’s heavy, and it seems like it comes with mega responsibility. Jesus in effect said that you cannot hide it; you cannot contain it; you cannot snuff it out. If you do not let it shine, it is not light at all. It is simply—darkness, because darkness is the absence of - light. Many people are in spiritual, emotional, darkness – cold, in pain, and in desperate need of the light. So, Jesus says, to put the light in a high place so that people can see it, feel it, touch it, follow it. DO NOT HIDE IT! Do not keep it away from others hidden. And what does this light do? It illuminates.

It is like the once very handsome man who suffered great disfiguration in a terrible accident and therefore lived by himself in the woods so as to avoid being seen by others. However, a terrible snow storm forced his hovel to be caved in and he had nowhere to seek shelter and wandered aimlessly through the night, nearly frozen to death, but somehow saw a light in the distance, a glow of a campfire. He drew closer to it and could see that it was a small group of hunters. The voices were familiar. He recognized them from the village to be people he had known many years earlier. Now crawling in the snow towards the fire, he came closer and closer. His bones could feel the coming relief from the warmth that was now only feet away. In his escape from his destroyed home, he did not have even a jacket or scarf and could not cover this disfigured face. He did not want the men to see him. He was too ashamed. He eventually stopped crawling in the darkness towards the fire out of fear of being seen, for surely the fire would illuminate every disfigured roll of flesh on his body. The hunters discovered him the next morning in the light of day after the storm had passed. He was only two feet from the fire, but they had not seen him in the darkness of the night. He died when so close to being rescued, all because he could not face what things look like when illuminated by the light. Like John Caldwell shared last week from Richard Rohr: The distance between ourselves and our pain correlates with our distance between ourselves and God. So, do not be afraid to be in the full illumination of the Light that God grants us, and do not hide it from others. They need it, more than you know. Some may only be feet away... they just need an invitation, an affirmation, an acceptance and love that comes from you. Be the light as you are in the light. Be the love as you are in the love. And share this with all those around you today, tomorrow, and forever. For you are the light, not the shadow. Shalom