



Pastor Robyn Hogue

Sunday's Sermon

Polluting the Shadows

Romans 13:8-10 and Matthew 5:14-16

September 10, 2017

Skyline Presbyterian Church

It's been quite the week. There is so much that overwhelms. We watched in horror as Hurricane Harvey descended on Houston and environs, and as South Asia lost over a thousand people to their flooding disaster. Earthquake hit Mexico like never before. Fires rage across the Western United States. Hurricane Irma has moved across the Caribbean and into Florida this morning. Some we know are among the lucky ones who don't have to do significant rebuilding, but we know firsthand what it is like to watch powerlessly as nature reminds us in the most visceral way possible, that we are not in control.

We are forged out of disasters in so many ways, yet we often believe we can avoid that truth. There is no control. There is no averting. There is no outrunning the power of nature. We can only respond. And that response is everything. It requires the deepest resources we can summon.

There's a poet who influences me; Muriel Rukeyser offers this: "What three things can never be done? — Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone." We can, of course, do these things. But our souls get torn apart when we do. I think of the difference between the response to Katrina when humanity seemed abandoned, and the way in which Houstonians and strangers alike have come together to help their fellow humans.

(Watch YouTube Human Chain Helps Rescue Man in Submerging Car.)

The one thing we can control in the face of nature, is how we show up. This kind of action usually doesn't take thinking about. It's simply what we do. And every small and large spontaneously brave action tells us something precious about what the human family is capable of. It is that knowledge that helps us get up to face another day, no matter what it brings.

Those small and large actions are times when we bring our light into the darkness, into the shadows. Things are rarely black and white. We have choices. Some of the choice are more right than others. Some are more wrong than others.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "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."

I want to talk with you this morning about ways in which you can bring light into those dark times and places. I want to talk with you about ways you can interrupt the shadows, compromise the darkness, and in a sense, pollute the shadows.

Once there lived a man who wanted to determine which of his two children was ready to take over his business. And so, he gave each an identical small sum of money. "Buy something with this money that will fill the house."

The older sibling tried to think of something to buy with money that could fulfill the father's wishes and decided on a load of straw. But when the load was delivered, there wasn't even enough straw to cover the floor.

The younger sibling tried to think of something to buy that could fulfill the father's wishes and decided on candles. As each candle was lighted, their light filled the house.

The happy father said to the youngest child, "To you I give over my business. You have shown true wisdom."

Rev. Robert Alden said, "There is not enough darkness in the entire world to put out the light of even one small candle." And that is true. No wonder the imagery of light is so important to our faith.

Light was the first thing God created. Some of the first words recorded in the Bible are these: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

For many people light is a luxury. In many parts of the world today we worry about too many street lamps and city lights causing "light pollution." But in many parts of the world, there are no street lamps. On a dark night, if we are traveling in that part of the world, the area is a scary place. Roads become treacherous and criminals ply their trade in the dark.

You are thankful that cities are often built on hills. "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden," noted Jesus. In ancient times, just like today, many towns and villages are built on the summits or sides of mountains, and can be seen from afar. From a great distance, one knows the location of the next village because of the light from that hilltop. Perhaps as Jesus spoke these words to His disciples Jesus pointed to such a city. He told His followers that they were to be like those villages that had become such a beacon for travelers.

But darkness is not only a problem on the road. At the end of the journey, light can still be a luxury. Imagine your home is in a region without street lights, without electricity, without backup generators and battery packs. Now imagine your home has only one small window. Imagine that your only source of light consists of a lamp which is a small bowl filled with oil that has a wick.

When you need light the lamp is placed on a lamp stand. The most difficult part of having this light in the house is in lighting the lamp. Remember you don't have matches or lighters. As a result, no one wants to let their light go out because it will take so much work to get the wick lit again. However, when people go out of the house it would be dangerous to leave the lamp lit. So, for safety reasons, when we leave our homes the lamp will be taken from its lamp stand and placed under an earthen vessel where it can burn risk free. We, of course, time our times away so that we can return in time to replenish the oil and trim the wick.

Jesus uses our everyday experience to say that of course, no one lights a light only to keep it under a basket or earthen vessel. That would defeat its purpose.

Those of us who know a bit about the study of communication may be familiar with Professor Emeritus in the UCLA Psychology Department, Albert Mehrabian and his famous work on credibility in communication. In this study, which dealt with the question "what makes a person credible when they seek to communicate with others," he concluded that when we are speaking to someone else our body language accounts for 55% of the message that the other person actually receives. Our tone of voice accounts for 38% of the message, and the actual words we use only account for 7% of the message the other person actually receives.

In other words, in terms of believability, Mehrabian finds concrete evidence that actions speak louder than words. It's important that we talk about our faith, but it is *really* important that we live that faith. In the common vernacular, it is *really* important that we walk the walk not just talk the talk. That is how we share our light. That's how we pollute the shadows.

Let me illustrate through sharing with you about a young woman and Presbyterian Young Adult

Volunteer, named Sara who spent six weeks one summer along the United States–Mexico border working with an organization called Frontera de Cristo. This organization provides humanitarian aid to migrants at the U.S. and Mexican border.

Far too many people have died trying to cross into the United States, most from dehydration or exhaustion caused by the oppressive heat and meager supplies. It is my position that no matter how you feel about this flow of illegal immigration, it is not right by Christ’s standards that these people, have died like this.

Sara spent her summer handing out bottles of water and granola bars, binding feet and seeking medical attention for those who had the greatest need. In seeking to let her light shine for Christ, she discovered something unexpected. She discovered a new closeness to God. Her faith grew as she worked with the men, women, and children who were forced to leave everything behind in search of a better life for their families. She says, “I don’t think it was because I was praying more or reading the Bible any more carefully, there was just something about being here and doing this that made it all seem so real to me.”

That often happens when put our faith into service for others. We discover that Christ’s light within us grows in direct proportion to the light we seek to provide for others.

A man tells of having trouble with his car late one evening. He made it to a small garage. Something about the engine needed attention. A mechanic examined the trouble while a helper stood by, directing the beams of a powerful flashlight into the recesses under the hood.

However, something else attracted the helper’s attention. He turned away and in doing so inadvertently turned off the light. The mechanic looked up, and with good-humored impatience exclaimed: “Shine your light! What are you here for anyway?”

There’s something to think about in that question. What do we think we are here for? We are here to use God’s blessings given to us for the sake of others. Want it said another way? We are here to take the Light of Christ into the shadows. We are here to pollute the shadows.