

Heartlight

Matthew 5.13-19
(The Scholars Version)

February 13, 2011

We have come to a moment in human history when the message of the Sermon on the Mount could indeed save us, but it can no longer be heard above the din of dueling doctrines. Consider this: there is not a single word in that sermon about what to believe, only words about what to do... Christianity as a belief system requires nothing but acquiescence. Christianity as a way of life, as a path to follow, requires a second birth, the conquest of ego, and new eyes with which to see the world.

- Robin R. Meyers

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its zing, how will it be made salty? It then has no further use than to be thrown out and stomped on. You are the light of the world. A city sitting on top of a mountain can’t be concealed. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket but on a lampstand, where it sheds light for everyone in the house. That’s how your light is to shine in the presence of others, so they can see your good deeds and acclaim your Father in the heavens. Don’t imagine that I’ve come to annul the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to annul but to fulfill. I swear to you, before the world disappears, not one iota, not one serif, will disappear from the Law, until it’s all over. Whoever ignores one of the most trivial of these regulations, and teaches others to do so, will be called trivial in Heaven’s domain. But whoever acts on these regulations and teaches others to do so, will be called great in Heaven’s domain.

You’ve probably heard the joke about the woman who had such a hard time getting her younger son up and out to church on Sunday mornings; but in case you haven’t, one particular Sunday morning she went in to wake him up and said, “Get up, put on your clothes, and go to church!” Her son rolls over, hides his head under the pillow, and responds with a pout, “I’m not going to church. It’s never any fun there and, besides, those people just don’t like me. Give me one good reason why I should go.” “I’ll give you two reasons” shot back the mother, “Number one, you’re not a child, you’re an adult and, number two, you’re the pastor.”

As this joke illustrates, some people don’t like going to church, and that for a multitude of reasons. The one that concerns me more than any other is people not wanting to go to

*James R. “Bo” Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

church because of the way they see faith being lived out on the big stage. The public face of Christianity is not always a faith of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation; more times than not you see a debate, a loud, angry, sometimes violent debate, which prompts many people to think, "If that's Christianity, I want no part of it."

I would like to reflect on this issue today; the face of Christianity and what we can do to change it. This issue is raised in today's gospel reading in slightly different form; what does it mean to let our light shine? There seems to be a malfunction in our light, and our task is to see what we can do to fix it. As we begin please join me in prayer.

Gracious One, open our eyes to your light that shines on and in us; the light you would have shine through us into the world. Warm our hearts, illumine our spirits, empower, challenge, and transform us so that we may not only learn what it means to let our light shine, but leave this place committed to do so day after day after day. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

We are three weeks into our reflections on the Sermon on the Mount, and finally we get a break. For the first two weeks we were dealt the hard sayings of the Beatitudes; and as we found out, they are difficult to understand, process, and live out in our lives. Blessed are those who grieve. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who hunger. These are hard sayings... but finally we are dealt something we understand; being the light of the world, letting our light shine... shoot, we know what that means! We've been singing about it since we were kids in Sunday School, in Vacation Bible School; everybody knows that song.

We know what it means to let our light shine... or do we? That I think is the question we should consider today, because I am not sure that we have let our light shine in the right way in our world. We claim that our faith is one that overcomes estrangement, that reconciles, that brings people together. It's a faith of compassion, of forgiveness, of gentleness of spirit to quote Jesus from the Beatitudes. But if you look at the way our faith is lived out on the big stage these days - in public, in the culture wars, in politics, even in the church - it doesn't look like our light is shining very brightly. We yell at each other. We condemn each other. We judge each other; and all in the name of letting our light shine.

Tony Campolo, a respected spokesperson for popular Christianity, has suggested that we might benefit from reading the Sermon on the Mount, because our light is not shining very brightly in the world, and that we need to get back to what Jesus said about how to live our

lives. We need, he says, to read and heed the Sermon on the Mount. That's timely advice since we've been spending so much time in the Sermon on the Mount... thanks Tony. Perhaps we can learn something from the Sermon on the Mount about how to let our light shine or, otherwise stated, about what it means to follow Jesus.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? I think that the best clue lies in a clarification of the word *follow*, because much of the difficulty we face in the modern church, many of the problems that have been caused by the modern church, stem from viewing faith as a matter of belief, rather than an active following in the steps of the Galilean. What do you believe *about* Jesus, about God? This is the question of faith as belief. And, believe me, there are plenty of orthodoxy police out there waiting to tell you when you're wrong. But there is another question; what does your trust in God inspire you to *do*? This is faith as following; and it is this following Jesus that is addressed in the Beatitudes. Have you noticed that there is not one word, not one injunction, not one instruction about what to believe in the Sermon on the Mount. It's all about doing; it's all about walking in faith; it's all about living faith in a very real way in a very real world. If we could find a way to put more emphasis on *following* Jesus than on what we believe *about* Jesus, we might be able to let our light shine in more compassionate, forgiving, and inviting ways.

Actually following Jesus; actually molding our lives on his life and teaching involves two traits. One is, as I mentioned a moment ago, the doing of faith, not just affirming faith, reciting a creed, or acquiescing to a set of beliefs; but actually walking the Way of faith. It is for a reason that the early disciples referred to their faith as the Way; a radically new way of walking and acting in the world; a radically new way of treating ourselves and others. Faith as following is lost when a set of beliefs is substituted for walking on the Way of faith.

The second trait of faith as following is *radical trust*. This is non-negotiable; you simply cannot follow Jesus without a radical trust in God. I am convinced that God is much more concerned with the trust you place in him than with your notion of the Trinity. Trust me, God says. Trust that God created you in the divine image and that you are a wonderful work in progress. Trust that at your core is a kernel of truth, beauty, and goodness; and that God wants to nurture that kernel and watch it grow until it overflows the boundaries of your life and

spreads into the lives of others. Trust that we live in a world in which there can be reconciliation; that we live in a world in which we don't have to depend on powers of manipulation and conquest. Rather, we live in a world in which we can treat others gently, and with compassion. Radical trust in God is the first step on the Way of faith; the life of following the heartlight God has provided in Jesus.

A word of caution; faith as following is not easy. The Way Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount is more than challenging; it is subversive of everything we have been taught by our society. It runs against common sense, it demands that we become new and different people. Faith as following is not easy, but it is the Way to which we have been called.

Precisely because faith as following is so challenging, so demanding, I would like to offer some practical advice; a few words to the wise as it were. Firstly, if we are going to walk the Way of faith, if we are going to follow in the shadow of the Galilean, we must realize that that Way begins and ends – it meanders here and there – within the confines of an expansive, inclusive circle that includes not only you and me, but our neighbor as well. Faith is never exclusively about me and God. Faith is always about *us*, and the Way of faith winds its way within that most inclusive of circles that we call the Domain of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, or any number of other titles that refer to a community molded in God's image.

Edwin Markham, a 19th century Disciple of Christ and poet, gives profound expression to this vision in a snippet of a poem entitled *Outwitted*:

He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win
And we drew a circle that took him in!

If we want to follow Jesus, we have to follow him within that circle that's so inclusive that our concern becomes our neighbor as well as ourselves.

Secondly, if we want to follow Jesus we have to respect ourselves. I know this sounds ironic, having insisted that living faith means getting outside of ourselves, but we will never get outside ourselves to consider the needs of our neighbor unless we respect ourselves. I'm convinced that much of the damage we do to others, much of the damage we do to relationships comes out of our sense of insecurity; out of our sense of feeling worthless and

useless. When we feel worthless we seek ways to feel better about ourselves, and we do so at the expense of others whom we belittle, judge, despise, and ridicule; anything to pull them down lower than ourselves. But all such treatment really indicates is that we don't respect ourselves, that we don't respect – or trust - the image of God in us. Created in the image of God we have nothing to prove! We have only to trust; and when we put our trust in God we don't have to prove that we're worthy... that's where we start; that's where God begins to build; the truth, beauty, and goodness of the image of God... a gift from God to us. We have only to remember that this image can't be rubbed out, it can't be effaced, it can't be pilfered, or even frittered away. It's always there, and God yearns only to nurture and nourish it to full blossom. Paul Tillich summarizes the situation as clearly as can be; we need to accept the fact that we're accepted. God *has* accepted us, and when we accept ourselves, we can begin to accept others as well.

Since we are talking about keeping things positive, I would also suggest, thirdly, that we define ourselves not by what we're against but by what we're for. There's nothing negative about the gospel, that's why we call it good news. And Jesus never pronounced himself against anyone or anything. He was always *for* something. He was for the Reign of God. He was for the poor, for the hungry, for the despised, he was for the Pharisees if only they would humble themselves. Jesus defined Himself by what he was for, and we should as well.

This attitude – being for God's Reign – puts us in a unique relationship with the world. We no longer need to go into the world seeking confrontation; seeking to tear down. Rather, we go into the world as part of a cause bigger than ourselves, seeking to build up. We need to know what we are for, and should take whatever steps are necessary to define ourselves in this way; it's that important. We can only follow the Way of Jesus if we stand for something larger and more gracious than ourselves.

It would also help us not to define our neighbor by her or his beliefs; rather, we should strive to see that individual as broken just like us, as wounded just like us, to realize that he or she needs the same forgiveness, the same compassion, the same help along the Way that we do. When we define people by their beliefs, particularly if they are beliefs to which we are opposed, they become less than people to us. They become simply an instance of that belief, a

part of that debate, a part of that problem; they're not people whom we need to approach with compassion. Even those with whom we disagree should be approached gently and in compassion. Should we choose to see them as children of God broken, wounded, and in need of a helping hand, then we can begin a conversation, and find ways to build community.

To follow Jesus, to walk in the Shadow of the Galilean, fifthly, we need not invest ourselves in a zero sum game. That is to say, no one has to lose for us to win. Winners don't always have to be balanced by losers. No one else has to be wrong for us to be right. The good news is faith is not this way. There's enough of God's grace to go around. There's enough room for us to talk about issues of faith without always agreeing; it's okay, really. There is enough space between you and me for that space to become holy when we fill it with compassion, acceptance, and dialogue.

Faith is not a debate in which someone is right and someone else is wrong. We are not trying to one-up someone else. We're not trying to out shine someone else. Sadly, when faith and politics intersect, the arguments begin and the goal quickly becomes proving we are right at someone else's expense. But faith is not about being right; faith is about building community. Faith is about finding ways to affirm and support those with whom we disagree even while looking for solutions to the sources of conflict and difference.

I believe in my heart of hearts that when the teaching of Jesus and the example of his life are synthesized and tied up in a package, bundled together and averaged up, they point us clearly to community building. I am very comfortable saying to you that in following the Galilean, community trumps all. If it comes to a choice between working with someone with whom we have a conflict or letting fly the barbs of debate, community trumps all; community trumps being right, community trumps being powerful, community trumps out-shining someone else, community trumps all.

If we can clarify what it means to follow Jesus, if we can clarify what it means to live from the heartlight that is ours as a gift from God, then we will see more clearly what it means to let our light shine. This, after all, is what we are called to do.