

“Shine”

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 – February 22, 2009

INTRO: Back in the apostle Paul’s day, some said his preaching was too complex and difficult to understand, not something any preacher wants to hear. Paul was probably aware that he had failed to win everyone over to become followers of Christ, and there are those who hadn’t believed Paul’s message. But, from his perspective, the fault was not all his—there are forces in the world that had prevented people from hearing the good news.

A number of years ago, there was a movie based on the true story of an Australian pianist, David Helfgott. That movie was *Shine* and the actor was Geoffrey Rush. David grows up as a child prodigy, while his father abuses him and his siblings, living with the memory of his own childhood in Europe and the loss of his family in the concentration camps. David finally breaks away from his father and goes to study overseas, but later suffers a mental/psychological breakdown and returns to Australia and life in an institution. Years later he is released and starts playing piano in a local bar, which finally leads him to the concert hall. Sadly, David’s talent was put on hold during his own struggle with mental illness. Yet, to hear him play piano, and to see him at the end of that movie, when he had returned to the concert hall, you could just see and hear the enormity of his talent which was finally able to shine through.

When somebody is really good at something, their whole countenance shows it. This past week, I was in Charleston, SC for a few days, and we took a carriage ride. We chose a carriage company that is known for treating their animals well, and in fact this particular company is the only one in town that uses mules instead of horses, because when it gets really hot, the mules deal with the heat better than horses, when they are pulling a large carriage. We were assigned a guide/driver whose name was Mark Jones. He’s one of those people who knows the city inside out, and is very entertained himself, telling you about what he knows. He made the history of Charleston just come alive as we rode around the city, and perhaps best of all, at the end of the trip, I found out he is United Methodist. Generations ago, his family was converted by John Wesley, and he has United Methodist preachers in his family, including his father. He was good at his job, and made you want to come back to his city and hear more about it.

A number of years ago I received an invitation from the Annual Conference planners, to form a Clergywomen’s Choir, to sing at the Annual Conference worship services. I had led this kind of group before, but it was always a real challenge to figure out how to rehearse with women from all over the state, and to get the music learned. My Dad told me it was about the last thing I needed to do—to take on one more thing. But I told him, it’s one of those things that feels as natural to me as breathing—I couldn’t not do it.

We sometimes say a person has the opportunity to really shine, when they’ve tapped into some very intrinsic vein of who they are—when the best of that person has the chance to come forth—and it lights them up and is contagious to people around them.

Paul reminds people that the brightness of God was seen in the face of Christ. You couldn’t miss it. And that same light, as it radiates through people’s lives, is a visible expression of God and of the nature of Christ. A Quaker saying speaks of this: “A divine flame shines within each being.”

The experience of light in his life was a definitive experience for Paul, who for part of his life, was trying to do in followers of Christ—trying to kill them. Until, one day on the road to Damascus, a brilliant light literally blinded him, and he became a converted follower of Christ instead of the enemy. Something changed for him on the inside. It was more than just the light shining in his eyes, but it permeated his whole life and was a spiritual power and presence that totally changed him and illuminated his insides.

22 year old Lorina came to a Bible Study, held in someone’s home in a military community, on another continent far from home. At the end of the meeting, she began talking with Steve, small talk at first, then she began to cry and said she really had no dreams for the future.

She spoke of a tragic past—the death of her mother, abuse from her father. She talked about often being afraid and being very lonely so far away from home. Steve was almost overwhelmed with her story, but before he knew it, he found himself asking Lorina to come to visit a refugee camp with him, and she agreed. The next Saturday, at the appointed time and place, Steve met Lorina and they headed for the camp. Steve and another friend told her that even though it might seem strange, the light of God would shine there in ways that it would never shine back in the relative comfort and safety of their daily routines. They entered the camp and went about the usual tasks of delivering food, medicine, and school supplies. Soon Lorina was surrounded by a bunch of children—she was touching their faces, talking to them, giving herself to each one around her, and her face was absolutely radiant—she was a different person. As they left the camp that day, Steve asked Lorina what she thought, and she answered with three simple words on which her hope now hung: “God is good.”

When the light of God transforms people’s lives or situations, it isn’t done through our effort or achievement, but it’s a gift through which God reveals something of God’s self to us. And having, here and there, been in touch with this light, we then want to share it with others.

One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, has written many stories about parenting her son, Sam. In one of those stories she says: “I make my son Sam go to church because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. People with a deep sense of spirituality follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful....Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.” (*Traveling Mercies*) They are sharing the light of God’s love with others.

I once heard a Jewish Rabbi telling his congregation about a visit he had made to Italy, where Jews couldn’t build synagogues larger than the majority religion, which was Catholicism. But, that didn’t seem to be a great problem. No, they don’t have elaborate places of worship and the building may be strictly low rise, but it means that their conduct has become more important than the construction of their buildings. How they lived their lives, through study, prayer, lives lived in dedication to God—that’s what people would see, rather than their buildings. The light of God is to be visible in who they are and what they do, as people of faith.

When Christians act with love and charity towards others, we reflect Christ to them, and at least in some little way, re-present Christ to them. On the other hand, when we live in ways that harm each other, when the divisions between people become even greater, “our witness to the redeeming love of God loses its authenticity and its power as our unwillingness to be reconciled continues.” (Reuben Job)

When we don’t authentically show the light of God to others, unlike those Italian Jews, our conduct has taken second place to our church buildings.

C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* says: “Every Christian is to become a little Christ....If we let God, if we choose, God will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, creature—a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) God’s own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for.”

John Ruskin lived in the days when English villages were lighted by lamps along the street. One evening, he watched with a friend as a lamplighter moved slowly up a hill, lighting the lamps along the street. Ruskin said: “There is what I mean by being a real Christian. You can trace a person’s course by the lights that they leave burning.”

Thomas Merton once said: “There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.”

As people of faith I hope we “follow a brighter light than the glimmer of our own candles,”

and I still believe the light we have to share is the kind of light the world needs from us. Let's live so that someone can trace our course by the lights that we have left burning.

--Sue Burwell