

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Shepherd Restores Us

Sunday, March 17, 2019

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Psalm 23

Recently I watched an episode of “Peppa Pig” with my son Paul. I only choose the best programming for my child. This episode was about Peppa discovering her shadow. She was outside playing and observed that her shadow followed her everywhere. She couldn’t get away from it. She tried. She tried to run away from it. She tried to jump out of it. Still, her shadow stayed with her. I thought “That’ll preach!”

The episode reminded me of a sermon that J. Wallace Hamilton preached entitled, “How Long is Your Shadow?” In that sermon he quotes a poem:

“I have a little shadow that goes in and out with
me
And what could the use of it is more than I can
see”

Whether we realize it or not, we all cast a shadow with our lives. In some cultures, shadows hold great power. In India, for example, if a lower caste person walks by a higher caste person while they are eating their food, they will throw the food away because they believe the lower caste shadow contaminated it. However, when Gandhi was alive people would mob around him just so his shadow would bless them. In the New Testament we read that some believed that good people carried around an invisible influence. In Acts we read of people would press in on Peter and other missionaries just so their shadow will fall on them and heal them (J. Wallace Hamilton, “What About Tomorrow?” pages 135-136).

All of this may sound hokey to you, but there is a great truth in all of it – we all cast some kind of shadow. And our shadow heals or hurts, blesses or bruises, comforts or cuts. No matter what you do you can’t get away from your shadow; it follows you wherever you go. Your shadow is your influence – how you affect people, for good or for bad. None of us can live life without casting a shadow and influencing others in one way or another.

If you don’t believe me, walk out into the street in downtown St. Pete and act like you see something strange on top of a building. See if other people don’t

join you and look up with you! Hamilton used to play this joke all the time as a kid, and he was amazed how many people he could get to look up at nothing (“What About Tomorrow?” 136-137).

All of us are highly susceptible to influence. Influence is powerful. How do we think fads and trends get started? One person begins to wear something and then another person wants to wear the same thing and on and on it goes. Soon everyone is wearing it. One person buys a certain Smart Phone and then another and another and soon everyone wants an I-Phone! Companies count on our influence to sell their products. Many of them also count on our gullibility.

The sobering thing is that the power of our shadow does not just apply to gadgets and clothes; it also applies to the spiritual and moral health of others. One person’s behavior can make or break a home, church, business, or institution. One person’s mistake can bring down a mighty fortress. I have known churches destroyed by the gossip of one person. I have known generations of families brought down by one person. I read somewhere that children who see physical violence between their parents are six times more likely to abuse their own spouses after they marry. If those children were also hit by their parents as teenagers, they are 12 times more likely to abuse their spouses.

But, you see, the opposite also applies to positive influence. No one can do something positive without creating a positive result. You can’t read the history of a great church, hospital, university, college, or non-profit without tracing it back to the influence of one person.

What does all of this have to do with the 23rd Psalm? You may not have thought of this before, but when David says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” he is talking about our shadow – our influence.

Many think this verse means that when we follow the shepherd we will receive goodness and mercy. This is true, but it is not the meaning of this phrase. The key word in this verse is “follow” me. In other words, David is saying that when we are loved by the shepherd we can’t help but reflect his love and goodness to others.

The goodness of the shepherd follows us wherever we go.

Mismanaged sheep can destroy a piece of land. They can eat away all the grass and leave a wasteland behind. However, sheep that have a good shepherd can transform a piece of land. The shepherd leads his sheep to the right grass and weeds to eat and moves them away from what not to eat. Good sheep will also spread their waste around and fertilize the land. They will leave behind a lush piece of land.

Do you know people who always leave something good behind? You always leave their presence feeling good, affirmed, nurtured, and loved. There is an old saying, "Some people leave you thinking how great they are. Some people leave you thinking how great you are." Which one are you?

Of course, the truth is for every person you know who leaves something good behind, I am sure you know ten people who leave negativity in their wake. Be honest. There are some people who are not very fun to be around. They leave you feeling terrible about yourself, about life, and about the world. Some of them can only talk about themselves. Others are just always negative. And some are just plain rude. I recall having lunch with a man who was rude to our waitress throughout the whole meal. When we left, I asked him if he was going to apologize. He replied, "For what?" He hadn't even noticed. You can tell a great deal about a person by the way they treat the people who serve them.

I am reminded of the story told by Zig Ziglar. He was on a long flight with a man who was insufferable. He was rude to the passengers and crew. He cussed and complained the whole trip. When they finally reached their destination, everyone was relieved to leave the man's presence. As they were filing out of the plane, one courageous flight attendant looked at the man and said, "You left something behind." He replied, "What's that?" She said, "A very bad impression."

When you say, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me," do you mean it? What kind of shadow are you casting with your life? What do you leave behind in your life? Do you leave peace or turmoil? Forgiveness or bitterness? Contentment or conflict? Joy or frustration? Love or hatred? How do people feel when they leave your presence? Be careful. You are always casting a shadow. Believe me – people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And people would rather see a sermon than hear one.

This is the reason why the church is not making more of an impact in the world today. It is not that we are not organized enough. We are plenty organized. It is not that we don't know what we believe. We have

plenty of creeds and systems of theology. It is not because we don't have enough programs. We are covered in curriculum and programs. Our problem is that we keep the love of Jesus to ourselves!

Today, churches and Christians are known for what they are against instead of what they are for. Turn on the television and we see that the whole world is polarized because everyone defines themselves by what they are against. And the church has followed suit. Living life defined only by what you are against is a pathetic existence. Tell us what you are for! Anyone can be against anything. What are you for?

The Gospel is defined by what it is for – the love of Jesus! We will never make a positive change for Christ by going against anything. Negative energy, no matter how hard you push it, can ever become positive energy. Jesus taught this in his parable of the wheat and weeds (Matt. 13). The farmer instructed his helpers not to pull the weeds because they might pull the wheat along with it. Instead, he instructed them to leave them alone and let them grow together and eventually they will separate.

I read of a farmer who had weeds growing in his field. He tried to pull them out, but it did not work. So he plowed the land, and then planted alfalfa seeds. The alfalfa grew 12 feet into the ground and was so thick that it choked out the weeds.

The positive solution to the problems of this world is not simply being against them but planting something so much more powerful and positive that these problems are consumed. Sow seeds of good influence and choke out the problems of this world. The love of God is that powerful. Isn't this what the old Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi is all about?

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal
Life.
Amen.*

If more Christians lived out this prayer, there would be fewer problems in this world.

I love the story told by Roy McClain, long time pastor in Atlanta. He was a counselor for inmates at the Atlanta Penitentiary. He told of one inmate with a life sentence who was genuinely converted to Christ. He committed himself to acts of kindness for the rest of his life. Every day in prison he reflected love to prisoners and correction officers. One day he died of a heart attack. They put him on a gurney and rolled him out down the rows of prison cells. When the gurney passed the most hardened criminal in the prison, the prisoner called out, "There goes the only Jesus I've ever known."

A seminary professor was vacationing with his wife in Gatlinburg, TN. One morning, they were eating breakfast at little restaurant, hoping to enjoy a quiet, family meal. While they were waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests. The professor leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But sure enough, the man did come over to their table. "Where are you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma," they answered.

"Great to have you here in Tennessee." the stranger said. "What do you do for a living?"

"I teach at a seminary," he replied.

"Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a really great story for you." And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with the couple. The professor groaned and thought to himself, "Great... Just what I need another preacher story!"

The man started, "See that mountain over there pointing out the restaurant window. Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother. He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same question, 'Hey boy, Who's your daddy?'" "Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, 'Who's your daddy?'"

He would hide at recess and lunch time from other students. He would avoid going in to stores because that question hurt him so bad. "When he was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church. He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?'. But one day, the new

preacher said the benediction so fast he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd.

"Just about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, 'Son, who's your daddy?'" The whole church got deathly quiet. He could feel every eye in the church looking at him. Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question, 'Who's your daddy'. This new preacher, though, sensed the situation around him and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could give, said the following to that scared little boy

"Wait a minute!" he said. "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God. With that he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'

With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person. He was never the same again.

Whenever anybody asked him, 'Who's your Daddy?' he'd just tell them, 'I'm a Child of God'." The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, "Isn't that a great story?"

The professor responded that it really was a great story!

As the man turned to leave, he said, "You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!" And he walked away.

The seminary professor and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked her, "Do you know who that man was who just left that was sitting at our table?"

The waitress grinned and said, "Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's the former governor of Tennessee!" (story taken from Scopes.com and verified to be true).

You may be the only Jesus people will ever see – in your home, at work, in the community. The same Jesus that walked on water, healed the sick and raised the dead lives in you. The Bible says so. By casting a Christ-like shadow we can change the world, one person at a time.

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” Do you mean it? More importantly, do you live it?

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. Has there ever been a time in your life when you realized you had an influence on another person? What was that like? What lessons did it teach you.
2. Read the Prayer of St. Francis again. What thoughts come to mind when you read it? How can you live out that prayer today?
3. Think of someone who has had a big influence on your life and faith. What did your experience of that person teach about influencing others?
4. Read the parable of the wheat and weeds in Matthew 13. What does this parable teach us about how to respond to the challenges of this world?



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