

Let Your Light Shine! (I Kings 17:8-24; Mark 12:41-44; II Corinthians 8:1-8)

This past week, I went to a seminar on the new St. John's Bible. The Saint John's Bible is "the first handwritten and illuminated Bible commissioned since the advent of the printing press more than 500 years ago."¹ The illuminations or drawings in the St. John's Bible are like Jesus' parables, so layered and rich in meaning that we spent over an hour on just one drawing.

But one hint in studying and understanding the illuminations is that whenever you see a golden light, it's symbolic of God's presence. For indeed the scriptures tell us that God, full of truth and purity and power, shines as light. Furthermore, in the illuminations of the St. John's Bible, you'll notice that some people have been drawn with a little of the golden light of God on them. And this is because the scriptures tell us that those who live as God's people shine.

Yes, just as God in his holiness shines, so too those who live as God's children, shine. Daniel said that the righteous shine "like the stars forever and ever" (12:3), while Job said that "the light of the wicked is put out" (18:5). Thus Isaiah told those upon whom the light of God has shined to arise and shine themselves (60:1)!

How brightly the godly people shine from the pages of our Bibles! For example, the widow of Zarephath. No one knows her name. After all, she was just a poor, struggling widow who lived around 850 years before Jesus. She wasn't even significant to the people of her day, for no one was coming to her rescue, even though she and her son were in a desperate situation. They were in the middle of a terrible famine, and they were down to the bottom of the barrel, actually, they were down to the bottom of their last jar of meal, facing sure and certain starvation. But this poor woman was a godly woman. She heard God's commandment to be generous. And thus even in her desperate situation, she chose to live as God's child. So when the Prophet Elijah showed up at her little hut seeking food, in fact, asking to be fed first, she didn't grumbled. She didn't try to persuade him that she didn't have enough to share with him. She didn't say that he and God were asking much too much. No, instead, she prepared the last of her food, offering all that she had. No wonder, all through the ages, the widow of

¹ *Daily News*, Winnipeg Art Gallery

Zarephath still shines! And God was so pleased with the way she reflected his light, his generosity and love, indeed, as God through Elijah had promised, the jar of flour was not used up, and the jug of oil did not run dry until the day the Lord gave rain on the land. And when the widow's son died, God through Elijah resurrected him! Yes, God was pleased with the widow because she remained faithful to him and his ways even during her adversity, even in spite of her fear of the future. God was pleased with this ordinary woman because she freely, willingly gave the man of God, gave God, the first cake of meal, even before she fed her son and herself. God knew that she respected and loved him enough to not give him and his prophet the leftovers.

Let's fast forward 800 years now to the New Testament to look at another person shining forth from the pages of our Bibles. This was another widow, another poor woman in a desperate situation, for as a widow, she had no husband, no job, no Social Security system, no welfare system. And again, we don't know her name. Apparently she didn't stand out to anyone but Jesus. Jesus was sitting in the Temple, watching as people came and dropped in their offerings to God. In the Court of the Women, there were 13 collection boxes called "trumpets," because the money was dropped in a trumpet-shaped opening which led to the container below. Each "trumpet" was for a special purpose--for example, to buy corn or wine or oil for the sacrifices and other expenses of running the Temple.² Jesus watched as person after person put in a bunch of coins that rattled down the containers, making a lot of noise, calling attention to the generosity of the giver. Then a poor widow came and, unlike the others, she put in the smallest offering allowed, just two coins. Rabbinic law said that one coin was simply too insignificant to offer to God. So, this widow put in the smallest amount possible. Needless to say, the poor widow didn't make much noise with her two little coins, but nonetheless, Jesus noticed her. Furthermore, Jesus noticed that she was shining brighter than all the others. Jesus knew that while the others had given a lot of money, they still had a lot of money left back home for themselves, whereas, the widow gave everything she had. She didn't have any money left back home for herself. Thus, lifting her up as an example, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on." Jesus was pleased

² Barclay, William, The Gospel According To Mark

with this ordinary woman because she loved and trusted God so much that she gave him everything.

In our epistle lesson for today, the Apostle Paul lifted up a whole church as a shining example. Paul said that not only did the Macedonians give "according to their means and beyond their means," they even begged "earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." They gave not only generously but also, like the widow of Zarephath and the widow Jesus saw, sacrificially. The Macedonian Christians shined, Paul said, because "in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part."

Paul lifted up the Macedonians because he knew how important it is for Christians to shine in the world. Across the centuries Paul thus told Christians, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:13-15).

We recognize people in our time who shine with God's light, don't we? Many people recognized God's light shining in Mother Teresa. When a British journalist named Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta to do a special documentary on Mother Teresa, he met her working in the midst of filth, garbage, disease, and poverty. But Muggeridge said that what struck him was the deep, warm glow on Mother Teresa's face and the deep, warm love in her eyes. He asked her if, after 18 years, she ever felt like quitting and letting someone else take over her ministry. She replied "Oh, no. This is where the Lord wants me, and this is where I am happy to be...How privileged I am to serve him." Muggeridge said, "I will never forget that little lady as long as I live. The face, the glow, the eyes, the love. It was all so pure and so beautiful. I shall never forget it. It was like being in the presence of an angel. It changed my life. I have not been the same person since. It is more than I can describe."

Robert Fulghum, who wrote All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, says that he placed alongside the mirror in his bathroom a picture of Mother Teresa. Thus every morning when he's shaving, he sees

this picture of the small humped-over woman wearing sandals and a simple blue sari in the midst of important-looking people in tuxedos and evening gowns, some even wearing crowns of royalty. But Mother Teresa is the one in the picture who's shining, as she, God's humble, obedient servant, receives the Nobel Peace Prize.

I read of a minister named Eric Hulstrand in Binford, North Dakota, who was preaching one Sunday when a woman named Mary fainted and hit her head on the end of a pew. An ambulance was called and Mary was placed on a stretcher. As she was being carried toward the door; however, Mary regained consciousness and motioned for her daughter to come closer to her. Everyone thought she might be wanting to tell her daughter some final words. But when Mary's daughter leaned over and put her ear close to her mother's mouth, Mary whispered, "My offering is in my purse."³ How Mary began shining!

I read another story about a woman who visited a church one Sunday in Gary, Indiana. The woman had two little boys with her. Just as the worship service was ending, the visiting woman told a church member that she wanted to talk to the minister and pay her tithe. The church member answered, "You're not a member of our church. You don't have to give us any money." But the woman insisted. So after everyone else left, this woman sat down to talk with the minister. She told him that after spending a few nights with her sons in a battered women's shelter, she was going to take the bus to Atlanta the next morning to start a new life far away from her abusing husband. She would live in a shelter until she could "get on her feet." "Before I leave," she said, "I want to have you pray for me, and I want to pay my tithe." She pulled out all the money she had in the world, counted out ten percent of it, and handed the \$30.56 to the surprised minister. The minister stammered, "You can't give this to us. You need it. It can make a difference for you and your boys." But the woman replied, "You don't understand. Even if I kept that ten percent, I wouldn't have enough money to provide for me and my sons. So I want to give it to God. I trust God will give me a new life. To show him I trust him, I want to give my money." What trust! What faith in God! Another example of an ordinary person who is shining example for all of us!

³ Rowell, Edward K., *1001 Quotes, Illustrations, and Humorous Stories*

Now, you've probably noticed that all of the shining examples we've talked about were people who had one thing in common: they gave generously, sacrificially to God. Time and time again I have seen many of you shine for the same reason. I've seen you make annual pledges to the general and capital funds and then give sacrificially for a special offering, a mission trip love offering, and the matching fund or the "Five to Thrive" fund. I've seen you lovingly support the children with their outreach to *Le Pelican*, and I've seen you bring food and school supplies for those in need through Community Assistance Council. I've seen God's light shine in you. And today I'm asking you to let your light shine again through your financial commitments and your time and talent or spiritual gift commitments for 2010.

We're not having a flashy expensive stewardship campaign this year. I don't think we need to because I know that many of you are like a man who years ago was the president of Duke University. One Sunday President Few was walking in the pouring rain to church. Some friends saw him, stopped their car, and offered him a ride. He got in, and as they drove toward the church, one of the persons in the car said, "Why did you decide to go to church in the rain this morning?" Few replied, "I didn't decide this morning. I decided 65 years ago, and I haven't had to ask myself that question since." So I know that many of you will give generously, faithfully, trustingly, bravely, because many, many years ago, when you were baptized, you decided to do so. As President Few had the holy habit of going to church, even in the rain, I know that you have the holy habit of giving your money and your time and talents to God--just like the widow of Zarephath, like the widow Jesus praised, like the Macedonians Paul lifted up. Just as the widows and the Macedonians continued to be generous, faithful, trusting, brave givers during their difficult times, in the midst of the difficult economic times in which we live, I know that you will do the same.

And for those of you who haven't understood the importance of giving, those of you who perhaps have dreaded the annual stewardship campaign, let me point out how important giving to God through the church is. Giving our money to God is so important that Jesus talked more about money than anything else. Time and time again Jesus made it clear that words are cheap. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father"

(Matthew 7:21). Jesus knows, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). One day a boy was walking in the street carrying a basket of eggs. He tripped on the curbstone, dropped the basket, and the eggs were smashed. A crowd gathered at the scene. One said, "What a pity!" Another said, "I'm sorry he is crying. Let's comfort him." Then a man stepped forward, reached into his pocket, and said, "I care a dollar. How much do you care?" During the annual stewardship campaign, God asks us to take out our wallet to show how much we care.

We'll receive our financial commitment cards and our time and talent commitment sheets for 2010 in the mail this week. They're our opportunity to show how much we care....how much we love God....to shine. Jesus commanded us to "let your (our) light shine before others, so that they may see your (our) good works and give glory to your (our) Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). When we make our financial commitments and our time and talent or spiritual gift commitments for 2010, like the widow of Zarephath, the widow at the Temple, the Macedonians, and Mother Teresa, our light will shine. Indeed, those who live as God's people shine.

Let us pray.....Giving God, who gave us the most precious gift of all when you gave Your Son to show us how to live and to save us from ourselves, inspire us to give of ourselves as well--and not just out of abundance. Make us generous, sacrificial, trusting, brave givers of our time and talents, as well as our money. Thus, God, may we shine, reflecting your light in the world. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 15, 2009