

**Into the Light**  
**Luke 6:34-36; 19:1-10**  
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**Lewinsville Presbyterian Church**  
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Several weeks ago, at the Lent Study our guest speaker **Dr. Cardoza-Orlandi** opened his four part lecture series with a story about Pastor Scott in seminary. I was sitting at a table with a bunch of youth, and it was a great hook to get their attention. **Dr. Cardoza-Orlandi** opened with a story about how he had challenged Scott, and how Scott had faced his difficult challenge and surprised **Dr. Cardoza-Orlandi** by doing the hard task proposed to him. I wondered while he was telling this story how Scott was feeling about it, and I was also sitting there thinking to myself how I might be rather mortified if a professor from seminary started telling stories about me from that time of life. Scott was in fact really Brave!!

Which led me to think about that time long ago when I was in seminary, and I had a particular professor that drove me a bit mad. Sometimes our greatest teachers are also our biggest adversaries. This particular professor did not teach Greek, or Hebrew (I actually loved those classes) nor did he teach systematic theology (I also loved all of those classes). No, the hardest class I took in seminary was in fact a Pastoral Care class. The class was entitled *Pastor as Person* and was taught by Dr. Bob Dykstra. Partly what was so frustrating to me about Dr. Dykstra was that no matter how hard I tried I could never get an A on any paper I submitted to him. He asked for something that at that time I was unable to give. He asked me and my classmates to offer weekly reflection papers about ourselves, particularly the parts of ourselves that we considered shameful. And at that time of my life I could just never complete the assignment satisfactorily. Somehow Dr. Dykstra could always read through the lines and tell that I just wasn't being all that vulnerable. I found it very frustrating.

The whole class was an exploration of the concept of shame, and how understanding our own shame is a vital part of becoming a pastor. Shame and guilt are sometimes confused with one another, but are slightly different. Guilt is feeling bad about past actions we have done whereas Shame is feeling bad about who I am. Shame is something that all humans feel and something that we generally want to avoid and never talk about.

The final paper for this particular class was commonly referred to around campus as the "shame" paper (in fact I brought it up to Crawford last night at dinner and he was like "oh yeah the shame paper everyone had to do that" . It was an infamous paper on campus. Essentially, The assignment was to write a paper about a shameful experience and then process how that experience formed you and would inform your role as a Pastor. I was so frustrated with the class, and the professor, that when it came time to write the paper I couldn't do it; for whatever reason I did not feel able to open up in the way that I was being asked to which meant I had found myself in a conundrum because getting a good grade was all I cared about,

and so I can admit today that I just decided to make up a story- and that's what I did. I totally made up a fictional shameful story. And then received my first A from Dr. Dykstra- ridiculous :). I have had enough therapy and spiritual direction that I am now much more comfortable with myself and able to admit to my shame a bit more openly. But It's obvious to me now that my trouble with these papers had everything to do with me wanting to avoid my own vulnerability. Cultivating vulnerability- the ability to see ourselves as we truly are looking in the "theoretical mirror" is a hard spiritual discipline.

Though I was frustrated with Dr. Dykstra's class, it is actually a class that I think about a lot. Dr. Dykstra planted seeds inside of me that over time have taken root and grown deep within my soul. I have always remembered Dr. Dykstra's image for shame; he said when we feel shame it is like a bright light being shined on us. We feel ashamed when we have the urge to close our eyes, hide our faces. To be ashamed is to feel exposed. Which is exactly what light does. Light transforms the shadows and reveals what is hidden.

Today's New Testament reading uses the imagery of Light and how light transforms followers of Christ. The writer states:

*<sup>8</sup>For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light*

The Book of Ephesians is a letter attributed to the apostle Paul who is writing to the Church in Ephesus which was a city the Apostle Paul spent time in while on his missionary travels. From the letter we learn that Paul is incarcerated and sending this letter to both encourage the church and share news of himself. The main theme of this letter is to communicate God's plan to reconcile Jews and Gentiles while also bringing harmony and unity to the world and universe, which is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The church with Christ as its head is the means for accomplishing this cosmic task. The first three chapters of Ephesians retell the story of the Gospel and why the death and resurrection of Jesus is so important, and the following three chapters discuss how that good news should change your day to day life.

Paul is saying when you become a Christian the light that is Jesus changes you and reorients your life. The Gospel doesn't just change your allegiances, thinking and faith practices but the Gospel should completely change how you operate in this world. When reading Ephesians you will encounter a lists of do's and don'ts. When reading verses like these I can become a bit defensive and want to roll my eyes at the text. In yesterday's Lenten Devotional Bruce Douglass helped me see Paul's call a bit differently. Bruce states

*Living as we do in a time when personal freedom is so highly prized and obedience to anything other than our own wills is often viewed with suspicion.... there is no getting around the fact that the idea of living in obedience to God's will for our lives is a central feature of the images of Christian discipleship we encounter in the New Testament. Critics of the Christian religion have often maintained that this strain in Christian piety is a recipe for submissiveness, and sometimes that has indeed been the case. But not always, and in some cases it has actually had just the opposite effect. In the Reformed*

*tradition in particular, the desire to serve the Lord obediently has often inspired stout resistance to demands for obedience from other, less worthy figures.*

With that in mind our Ephesians text today opens with the author saying “You are light. So live like it!” Paul is telling his reader and us today. That part of our participation in the kingdom of God is to step into the light which will expose us for who we truly are and will expose the world for what it is. For when we are light we cannot hide. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and famous Christian author tells us that if you are feeling defensive to this sort of intensive personal excavation

*“Take a deep breath.... Self scrutiny is not to discover how bad or good you are or to regain some moral high ground but it is to begin some honest shadow boxing which is at the heart of all spiritual awakening. Yes, “the truth will set you free,” but first it tends to make you miserable.”<sup>1</sup>*

Many of you have probably heard the name Brene Brown. She is a researcher, professor, author, podcaster, and also gave the most watched Ted Talk of all time. She is a sort of a pop culture figure who made a career of teaching the world what Dr. Dykstra taught my seminary class. Brene became famous telling the world that shame is important to listen to and that it is key to living a wholehearted life. Brene states that understanding Shame is critical to understanding oneself. She defines shame as being the fear of disconnection, believing that if others know who I am then they most certainly will reject me, but in reality keeping things locked up in the shadows is what keeps us from being able to connect with other people. In her very famous ted talk Brene tells us that some people are able to get past shame, and able to live a life of connection....stating

*these folks have, very simply, the courage to be imperfect. they have the ability to connect with others as a result of authenticity, they are willing to let go of who they think they should be in order to be who they are. And they fully embrace vulnerability. Vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love.*

I believe our text from Ephesians rings true. As Paul states “*everything exposed by the light becomes visible,<sup>14</sup> for everything that becomes visible is light.*” That which we are most fearful of in the light of Christ becomes that which connects us to one another.

A couple of years ago on a youth trip to Montreat (it was my first time attending Montreat), I witnessed what it means when everything that is visible is light. Montreat Youth Conference is a youth conference in the mountains of North Carolina, just outside of Black Mountain (which our youth will be going this summer during the first week of August and registration is open :) ).

Part of what happens every year at Montreat is that the youth are split up into small groups; they are separated from their back home groups (so they do not know anyone in this

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr

group), and are put in groups with youth from around the country to talk about themselves, God, the church, and being a Christian. I was also assigned to a small group to be one of the adult leaders. On Thursday morning during our small group discussion the youth (who remember I had just met this week) took a risk to be incredibly vulnerable with one another, they began sharing their stories, their pain, and their heartbreak. They talked about rejections they have experienced, shared stories of family trouble, divorces that they didn't understand, and they spoke of recent family deaths that occurred, they discussed fights with brothers and sisters, and some even shared about abuse they have experienced by family members, and the list goes on and on. I was moved to tears sitting in this room by their stories; my heart was broken thinking about how hard life had been for some of these kids, but I was also extremely moved and encouraged in my spirit by their willingness to share their true selves with each other. And the Holy Spirit met us in that room. You see, while this sharing was happening (we were all sitting in a circle) when unencouraged by any adult leader in the room, the Youth began holding hands, one by one by one each grabbed the hand of the person sitting next to them, tears pouring down their cheeks, and the group was literally holding one another saying I don't know why this is happening to you but I love you, I am here for you, and I do not judge you. Earlier in the week the small group leader told everyone when we pray that we are to hold hands with our fingers interlocked, because our fingers represent our strengths, and in between our fingers is our weaknesses, so when we pray we would lock our fingers together so our strengths would hold each other up. In this moment the youth in our small group were vulnerable sharing their weaknesses with one another. Together they stepped into the light and they received support and strength from one another. I believe that this small group experience and this particular moment that I witnessed what it means when Paul states that *everything that becomes visible is light*.

Reflecting on the text this week I have realized that when we try to keep shameful things hidden, brush it under the rug, or keep secrets hidden inside us we have to build internal walls or structures to keep the light out, which means we have to keep part of ourselves hidden in the shadows. It also means that we have to be defensive and protective, keeping those internal structures strong and impenetrable, which means we become brittle, distant, and quick to defend ourselves, we end up spending more time tending to our internal fortresses than connecting or caring for our fellow humanity. But Paul tells us that when everything is exposed by the light it becomes the light. Paul is telling us that becoming visible is an important part of the healing process. Becoming visible, being brought out into the light is a step that cannot be skipped. It may feel terrifying, it may take you years to feel comfortable and able to do so. We may need the help of a therapist and a Spiritual director, but with God's help you can be reformed and set free by the light that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Final verse of our New Testament text states: Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Many scholars believe that this quote is from one of the earliest Christian Hymns. I imagine Christians gathered together singing about the powerful

transformation experienced by the light of Jesus Christ, which in just a couple moments we will join that cloud of witnesses and do the same.

This lent season our Lenten theme is “the Journey to the Cross” and there is no better example of the most shameful thing being transformed into light than the Cross and crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' shame and humiliation is the Light that changes the world. Everything exposed is light, and we are children of that light, so we need to be about the work of living like it. As we journey towards the cross on Good Friday let us not be ashamed ourselves or one another. Let us be about the work of standing in the light and letting the gospel reform and reshape the shadows into the light that will transform the world. Amen

Close in Prayer:

In Jesus, there is no darkness at all  
The night and the day are both alike  
The Lamb is the light of the city of God  
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus... Shine  
Amen