

The Church's Place in the World
September 18, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

- In the New York gubernatorial election of 1793, John Jay received more votes than George Clinton. Due to a technicality, the votes from Otsego, Tioga, and Clinton counties were disallowed, giving the race to George Clinton.
- Then there was the bleeding Kansas election of March 30th, 1855. It was an election to decide if Kansas would be a free or slave state. Mass immigration was used to sway the vote and following the election a US senator was severely beaten up by a congressman.
- The presidential election of 1876 between Samuel J. Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes was highly disputed and eventually settled by the Compromise of 1877. That Compromise included pulling the last of the federal troops out of the South, thus ending Reconstruction.
- In the 1960 presidential election, there are many who said mobster Sam Giancana and his crime syndicate in the state of Illinois played a part in the victory for John F. Kennedy.
- Then, who could forget the “hanging chads” of 2000.

In other words, election seasons have had all kinds of shenanigans and questionable activities for a long time. I pick on politics because it is such an easy target – low hanging fruit, as it were. If mouths are moving, it is entirely possible that lies are being told. The tension and volume levels go up as we get closer and closer to the election. I could pick on lots of ways in which the activities of the world are dissonant with Christian teaching and morality. The question arises, at least for me, what is the church's place in our world? In other words, do we have any relevance in the world or is that just a happy myth we've been spreading.

The writer of Timothy was not blind to the ways of the world and the church's tension with the world. In fact, since everyone has to deal with the world somehow, he admonishes the church to “Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation.” As we look at our own country and around the world, we can certainly see rulers and governments in need of prayer!

Beyond prayer, what is the place of the church in our world? We know that a lot of people are struggling, and for them the world is a dark place. The choir has told us to “Go Light Your World.”

So carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, confused and torn
Hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light your world
Take your candle, and go light your world.ⁱ

What does it mean for us to light the world? How do we live in such a way that we bring light?

The gospel lesson – one of the more troubling stories of Jesus – may just have an answer for us. First, we have to figure out what is going on in this story. We have the manager who has been pocketing some of the business owner's profits. Let's face it. He's an embezzler. On his way out the door, he lowers the bills of everyone with whom he has done business. He figures that, though he no longer has a livelihood, these people will take care of him. The business owner then goes on to praise the dishonest steward. What is that all about? First he fires him, then he praises him for losing even more profits for the business. What kind of business model is that?! Remember, parables are all about a story that begins by moving in one direction, but then has a quick shift. When you read or hear this story, who do you identify with? Are you the rich business owner who is calling the shots? Are you the dishonest manager? Or, are you one of the people who does business with the company and has your debts reduced by the dishonest manager? I think Jesus intends for us to identify with the people who have their debt reduced and Jesus becomes the dishonest manager.

Uh oh. I used 'Jesus' and 'dishonest' in the same sentence. How can I call Jesus, the perfect One, the son of God, dishonest? That is just plain scandalous! Well, Jesus is not one to reject a good scandal. In 1 Corinthians 1:23 we read, "But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." The Greek word translated here as "foolishness" is *skandalon*, the word from which we get "scandal." What is the scandal of Jesus in today's Parable of the Dishonest Manager? Jesus is giving the kingdom away – giving it away! He's giving it to *those* people: tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, and *us*. True foolishness and scandal.

As we move back to our epistle lesson, it went on to say, "He wants not only us but *everyone* to be saved, you know, everyone to get to know the truth we've learned: that there's one God and only one, and one Priest-Mediator between God and us – Jesus, who offered himself in exchange for everyone held captive by sin, to set them all free." Being set free is the operative idea here. We are a people of hope. We are here because we either know or are seeking reassurance that we are loved by God. Sadly, not everyone carries that same hope. Again, going back to "Go Light Your World":

Frustrated brother, see how he's tried to
Light his own candle some other way
See now your sister, she's been robbed and lied to
Still holds a candle without a flameⁱⁱ

Again, how does the church find a way to bring hope to the hopeless? First, we come together as a family of faith. We gather as the body of Christ and remember who we are. We hear God's word – a transforming word. We then respond as we build relationships with all kinds of people. This week I got to talk with two new Habitat homeowners. One was from the Congo and lived for 12 years in a refugee camp in Tanzania. At his home, I also met a United Methodist pastor from the Congo who arrived in the US from a Tanzanian refugee camp with his family just this week. The other home owner is an African American woman with two teenage sons. No doubt, these people have had crises of hope in the past, but they are excited about a new life here, and you, the church, helped that happen.

In order to build relationships, especially with people who are hurting, we need to learn new ways of being and new ways of listening. Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thích Nhất Hạnh, speaks of compassionate listening. It is the opposite of the rhetoric we often hear – especially in the world of politics. It is a way of listening that focuses completely on the other person in order to take away their suffering. It is nothing more than listening without forming opinions or offering suggestions. Thích Nhất Hạnh says, "Fear and anger and despair is born on the ground of wrong perceptions, and we have wrong perceptions concerning ourselves and the other person and that is the foundation for conflict and war and violence. We should be able to say, 'Dear friends, dear people, I know that you suffer a lot. I have not understood enough of your difficulties and suffering. It is not our intention to make you suffer more. It is the opposite, so please tell us about your suffering, your difficulties. I'm eager to learn to understand.'"ⁱⁱⁱ This type of listening works with people we do not know well and with our own families. It can reignite the flameless candle.

So, what is the church's place in the world? The writer of Matthew's gospel says these words in Eugene Peterson's translation: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)

In other words – the words of the song,
Cause We are a family whose hearts are blazing
So let's raise our candles and light up the sky
Praying to our Father, in the name of Jesus
Make us a beacon in darkest times

So Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, deceived and poor
Hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light your world^{iv}

ⁱ “Go Light Your World” by Chris Rice. Text viewed at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/go-light-your-world-lyrics-chris-rice.html>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thích Nhất Hạnh in an interview with Oprah Winfrey viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyUxYflkhzo>,

^{iv} “Go Light Your World”.