



Roanoke, Virginia
January 21, 2018

“Shining Lights”

Luke 8:16

Dr. George C. Anderson

¹⁶ “No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.

I was a young Associate Pastor in Kingsport, TN. Playing basketball at the Y, I got to know another young pastor; a Pentecostal minister. He invited me to go with him to a musicians’ conference. It was to be held in a huge gym with over a thousand Pentecostal *Ministers of Music* in attendance. He told me the music would be incredible and unlike anything I ever heard. I agreed to go.

I expected him to be right; that the music would be both outstanding and different from my normal Sunday morning fare. I also expected to hear speaking in tongues during prayers and the sermon. My expectations were met.

What I did not expect was a fantastic sermon. My prejudice was that Presbyterians are supposed to be better at content and Pentecostals better with emotion, but the sermon preached at that conference had a message that has stuck with me ever since. The preacher told the musicians that he assumed they all had gifts in music. (He was wrong about me, but boy was he ever right about the rest of that crowd – the singing was amazing!). He assumed they all had gifts in music and he was glad they felt called to share their gifts in service of the Gospel. But they must never, forget, he told them, that the Gospel is the message, *not* the messenger.

I don’t remember that preacher’s name, but I do know the name of John Bright. He was a remarkable Old Testament scholar who taught at my seminary but retired before I arrived. Walter Mann had him as a professor though. Walter is a retired Presbyterian pastor whose ordination is the only thing keeping him from being a member of this congregation. He sent me a kind and thoughtful email in appreciation of a sermon I preached. He also praised Elizabeth and Rachel’s preaching. He then shared a memory of something Bright said. The esteemed Old Testament scholar said, “When I go to church, I do not care to hear what some puny little preacher thinks, but if that preacher has a word from Yahweh then I want to listen.”

This puny little preacher agrees with Dr. Bright. Ordination is not a license to pass off personal preferences as Gospel or a chance to say “Look at me” every Sunday.

But even Dr. Bright would say that the message of God’s Word needs a messenger. He was a great scholar of biblical history because he knew that faith comes of concrete, historical, lived experience of God’s judgement and grace. And our faith has always required messengers. Bright wrote a commentary on the prophet Jeremiah and would tell you that Jeremiah, the prophet whose

career was both in Judah before the exile and in Babylon after the exile, had a distinctive voice. He preached a harsh word to those who lived on false hope and a hopeful word to those who gave into despair.

- Ezekiel and a distinctive voice. He who was something of a performance artist who put on public demonstrations to make his points.
- The writer of Matthew's Gospel had a distinctive voice. He was the great storyteller, who so clearly saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses.
- The woman at the well had a distinctive voice. She carried on a long theological conversation with Jesus with the distinct perspective of a Samaritan and a woman.

Think of the ministers who preached from this pulpit over the years.

- When Dr. Rowbotham preached, the Gospel was proclaimed with a Scottish brogue.
- Dr. Edmunds conveyed the elegance of the Gospel not only with his verbal eloquence but also as he preached in tales.
- Dr. Hollingsworth spoke with such authority that the rumor among the children was that his was the voice of God.
- Dr. Klein's sermons were thoughtful and theological, but also had a poetic quality that pointed beyond content to the mystery of faith.
- When Rev. Thompson and Rev. Link preach, their passion for children, youth, and families comes through even when they are not directly talking about them.
- And I have my own distinctive voice, and this Children's choir is so lucky that they get to hear this sermon *twice*.

This is the nature of our Christian faith; good news is shared in real time and in unique and personal ways.

This is true of us and it is true with God. God's Word is most clearly spoken with the distinctive life, words, and actions of Jesus. I believe that Jesus is the exception to the point that the Pentecostal preacher made. Both the message and the messenger are Gospel because Jesus is God's Word spoken. And so with Jesus unique mind and heart, he gives clarity to the Law and Love of God. He casts visions through parables and it was important to him to heal untouchables by touch. All rabbis of Jesus' day teach about the Law of Moses for their day, but none of them do it in the way Jesus does, by preaching the Sermon on the Mount.

And right after applying his gifts of biblical interpretation in preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus then encourages others to express their own unique gifts. "Let your light shine," he says. "There is a distinctive witness that can be made by your own life being illumination. Let your life shine with the Gospel and maybe when others see the Gospel illuminated in you, they will recognize grace at work in their own lives."

We have the Roanoke (Valley) Children's Choir with us today. Each member of this choir is musically gifted. Each singer has her or his own unique voice. The choir would not be worth listening to if every singer sounded exactly alike. The diversity makes harmony possible. And then, together, the choir has its own unique voice, unlike every other choir in the world. And when they

today, offer music in worship of God, they become a unique and special means by which the Gospel can be heard in a fresh way.

Let's remember that what is true about these singers and this choir is true for us as well. We have our own unique personalities and gifts. We all have our own lights to shine. Joining our voices and our witness, we become a unique body of Christ, offering a witness unlike any other congregation in the world. Let's let our light shine. The world needs illumination to recognize God's grace, and to recognize what betrays it.