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## ***“The Shadow of the Church”***

*Part III of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”*

*Acts 5:12-16*

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When I came home from Davis Elementary School in Montgomery, AL I was not allowed to watch TV. And I was expressly forbidden to watch the *Gothic soap opera* that high schoolers kept talking about: *Dark Shadows*. Of course, Mom couldn't keep an eye on six kids at once, so I would sometimes sneak a peek.

I was usually disappointed. *Dark Shadows* truly was a soap opera, so its pace was slow while mine was fast. Because of its pace, I didn't find it that scary... except for the beginning. This was in the days when the show was filmed in black and white (a show called *Dark Shadows* should never have been filmed in color). The show began with eerie music playing in the background as the camera sneaked past trees, a porch and a mansion. You knew that somewhere in the woods, or in the house, or maybe right behind you was lurking Barnabas Collins, the family vampire.

The show played off the idea that dark is the realm of evil, providing cover for bad decisions and for those who would do harm.

The show didn't invent the idea of dark and shadows being *sinister*. Poets, writers, and parents wanting their children home before dark have worked the danger angle—physical and moral—for centuries. Even the Bible speaks metaphorically in that way. A few examples from the New Testament:

- At the beginning of John's Gospel, we are told, [“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”](#)



- Jesus in Luke says when speaking of evil that one day will be exposed, “[What’s done in darkness will come to light.](#)”
- And II Thessalonians says of the faithful that they are “[children of light](#)”.

With so many negative connotations to shadows and darkness, some light-skinned folks have assumed superiority because of skin tone... which doesn’t make sense when probably all the Bible writers and Jesus himself were dark-skinned. No, the biblical writers were not concerned with hues. They were concerned with what could be hidden from others out of shame or cunning, or what could be done to others for selfish gain.

Also—and this is even more important to understand—the Bible writers were as creative with their words and images as visual artists are with their colors and hues. Like Rembrandt who so enjoyed painting scenes from their stories, the Gospel writers played with light and dark, finding virtue and vice in each of them. The Gospel writers were as aware then as we are today that the violent and unholy can be committed in broad daylight without apology or shame.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminded us in her 2009 Edmunds Lectures of how darkness can be the realm of the good and holy. It can be the realm

- of divine mystery,
- of renewing sleep and Sabbath rest,
- of soulful prayer,
- of interactions between people when the guard is let down and one’s heart opens up,
- of blooming love,
- of cover and protection.

There are things to learn and kindnesses shown that can only happen in the dark.

Just to offer a few scriptural endorsements of dark and shadows:

- God separates light from dark and sees both as good.
- The Psalmist looks at the night sky and is in awe at the greatness and goodness of the Creator.
- Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and there begins his new journey of faith.
- And in Psalm 121, God promises to be our shade at our right-hand providing protection and relief from the blinding and burning light of the sun.

And *then*, there is our passage. Listen.

<sup>12</sup> The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. <sup>13</sup> No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. <sup>15</sup> As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on



some of them as he passed by. <sup>16</sup> Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

In the moment of this passage, the church is exploding... even though officially there is not yet something called “the church.” The community of those who seek direction by following Jesus is growing by the day, but this movement is not yet seen as a separate entity with non-profit status or representatives to send to ecumenical conferences. Jesus followers have not left the Jewish faith or have been kicked out by it. Later in Acts, when Gentile diets, fashions, and customs become acceptable within the community of Jesus-followers, then you really start to see a separation—a coalition, a naming of leaders, an establishment of rites, a formalizing of rules. But not now.

What we have right now is a growing reputation. The reputation of the movement and its leaders—the apostles—is exploding. The explosion is not due to effective organizing or advertising, but to word on the streets that the apostles are *changing peoples’ lives*. With their preaching and teaching, they are changing minds and hearts. And word is spreading that healing is found in their company... in their shadow. The Gospel writer Luke, who is the author of Acts, isn’t subtle about this. He simply describes miracles of bodily healing. In the presence of the Apostles—especially Peter—the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are clean again.

As stories about the apostles spread, the masses gather in Jerusalem. They are rich and poor, heathy and sick, excited and desperate. Our passage focuses on those who come to find relief—the poor, the sick and desperate, the privileged and dispossessed. They come to Solomon’s Colonnade, a portico on the side of the Temple, for that is where the disciples—as Jesus did before them—preach and teach. Knowing that Peter has only so much time and attention to give, the sick lie down—or are laid down—on the path to the colonnade so that maybe when Peter walks by, his shadow will cross over them and heal them.

*Healing in the shadow.* That’s the image of the story that I want to remain with you. For in that image we have an *ethical question with a miracle wrapping*. The ethical question that Luke is asking of Jesus-followers then and Jesus-followers today is this: “**Will harm or healing be found in your shadow?**” Will the shadow cast by your existence in this world be one that brings grace or disgrace?

Sure, the question is indirect, but *that is how narrative theology works*. Every time Luke talks about Peter, Luke is talking about *his* church.... And *any* church. Any failing of Peter is a failing of the church, and Peter’s every graceful word and deed illustrates the possibility of what the church can be.

In this story, Luke is asking Jesus-followers to look around.

- Do you see those who are looking for healing and hope?
- Do you see the lonely, those thirsting for meaning and purpose?
- Do you see the disenfranchised and the oppressed?
- Do you see the sick who want healing of pain and disease, or healing from their fear of death?



- Do you see the poor in spirit? Do you see the poor in means?

Luke is asking of the church, “[What will they experience in your shadow?](#)”

We are Americans today, not Middle Eastern then, so we might miss an important detail in our story. There is an irony to be found in the social location of these people lying on the side of a path that leads to Solomon’s Colonnade. Basically an enormous portico, the colonnade is one of the last remnants of the temple King Solomon built. Solomon was known for his faith and being a sponsor of Wisdom but was also known for his greed which drained his people of resources, leading the next generation to revolt and his nation splitting in two.

Luke’s readers know that. And they know that even after Solomon’s temple was destroyed, King Herod—a man of *little faith* and *great lust for power*—rebuilt the temple which includes this surviving portico. They also know that Jesus was almost stoned in this Colonnade, even though he had just performed acts of compassion, because he was seen as a threat to religious powers.<sup>1</sup>

It is so easy for Luke’s audience to see what we might miss. The reputation of these apostles was spreading not because they were Solomons and Herods who built things to see but because they were bringing good news to those whom Solomon and Herod often overlooked or denied.

Luke, in telling his story, wants to make sure that Jesus-followers of his and our day are living up to the reputation of these apostles. “[Are people hurt or helped in the shadow of those who claim to follow Jesus?](#)”

That is an ethical question Christians and churches should continually ask of themselves. It is why we continue to offer Confession, enter into silence and prayer to hear a voice other than our own, and conduct moral audits of our personal lives and corporate ministry. It is why we continue to remind ourselves that though we need the colonnade protections offered by the state, we exist to cast our own shadow. It is why Colossians says something frequently quoted in weddings but which could give us regular pause in considering our lives: that our works do follow us..., a different way of speaking of the shadow cast by our lives.

When this pandemic began, people’s lives were disrupted, needs were exposed, and existing tensions exploded into the streets. I think that people are looking for some shade—some rest and relief, some peace and healing. They are asking what can be found under the shadows being cast.

I could take this opportunity to be negative because we all know that every Christian and every church could do better. Like I said, Luke does not hide Peter’s flaws. But because I think that we grow better not on a platform of shame but by growing into the image of God, I tend to focus on existing evidence of grace and goodness.

I am grateful for a shadow this church has cast during this pandemic. You might not know this, though I am sure you are not surprised, that in the early days of the pandemic your Finance Committee immediately began tracking income and spending. But a decision was made right away not to cut giving to meet crisis needs. Also, the Help Fund was put to more aggressive use, the Mountain Ave Fund was named as the recipient of all undesignated gifts and bequests, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See John 10.



Relief Offering was made a weekly part of worship—an offering which you heard has exceeded \$40,000. Your giving to the church has stayed strong.

Meanwhile,

- in light of protests, an effort was given to listening and understanding;
- in light of social isolation, an effort was given to increased phone calling;
- in light of social distancing, an effort was given to worship and education offered online;
- in light of confusion, an effort was given to increased communication...

I'm not saying it is enough. The passage wants us to audit ourselves so as to reduce harm and increase healing. But if the Church is seen in Peter, we must notice that people seek our shadow, and when we see that grace is found in its shade, we should rejoice and be glad. It is something to celebrate... and build upon.

