

**Candle of Love©
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Matthew 5:14-16

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The last time I preached was back in October. Then I left in a rush to go to North Carolina where my dad was struggling after being in the hospital with respiratory failure. My goal was to be there a week at the most, to figure out how to help him get stronger but also to convince him that he needed to move from the apartment he lived alone in and to be somewhere safe where he could have some help.

I arrived on Friday, and on Saturday, five weeks ago yesterday, he went back into the hospital, had major surgery for a bowel obstruction, tried so hard to recover but finally could not. One week ago yesterday I had the privilege of leading his service, alongside his pastor who has become a good friend and colleague.

Before I left I preached two sermons on prayer. The first was about why we should pray and the last one was on how we should pray. As I tried to think of all the different ways people pray I told the story of my dad and how I heard him praying in his bedroom. I went in to sit beside him, thinking how meaningful it would be to actually pray with my father. It was something I never dreamed would happen. And it didn't that day. He stopped when I came in. He said it was a private personal thing for him. I accepted that and let it go.

But when we were in the hospital a couple of days before his surgery, which he knew was very risky, he said to me, "We have some unfinished business. When you were here last summer, you wanted to pray with me but I was startled. I'd never prayed with or in front of anyone before. I didn't think I would want to do that. But, I do want to pray with you."

My dad reached out and took my hand and prayed the most beautiful prayer I've ever heard. Starting with thanking God for all he had and then for his children, his grandchildren, his pastor and his church and his friends. Asking God for protection and good health and prosperity for all of us. And he prayed for the military men and women. And then he asked God to help him through the surgery. But he said that if it was God's will for him to not make it through, he was ready. He wanted to live, but he was ready to go home if that was his time.

I, of course, was weeping by the time he was finished. Never in my life had I experienced something like that, especially with him.

I wanted to tell you that because of sharing the other story about him not wanting to pray with me. I am happy to share, as Paul Harvey used to say, "The rest of the story."

And I was thinking about it as I considered this text where Jesus tells us, as his followers, that we are to be light. We – as a part of Him – are the light of the world. We are to shine for others to see the light and to walk into the light; to become light along with all believers.

So, is it possible to be a believer – to be one of the lights of Jesus – and yet not let it shine? Is it possible to be light but to hide it?

In a way, I think that's what my dad was doing.

I'm not saying all people should pray out loud with others. There are certainly different ways of letting others see your light. But in my mind, as I reflect back, it seems like dad had the light, certainly. Yet, he didn't talk much about it. And he certainly did not want to share in prayer. It was kind of like he was hiding it under that bushel basket.

When he prayed with me in the hospital room, it felt like he lifted that basket off of his light and it was shining so brightly. In my case with him, I needed to see that light. And he, without my asking, gave me that gift.

There have been many others in these last few weeks who have allowed their lights to shine. This Sunday's theme is the candle – the light of love – and that is what I experienced.

My new friend and colleague – my dad's Southern Baptist pastor – showed me such respect and equality as a female Presbyterian pastor that I felt honored and lifted up. And there were many friends of dad's, from his church, who went far out of the way to support, and visit dad, and sit with me; to eat a meal with me; to offer to help in anyway.

They could have made a short visit a couple of times and then been done. But they had their full light shining through the entire ordeal. They were a support and a comfort to both my dad and me.

So, what are some ways that Christians hide their light? Have you ever considered what that bushel basket might be a metaphor for? I mean, if we just go with the bushel basket we get a funny little image of a candle under a basket. It doesn't have a great deal of meaning, does it? Why would we do that anyway?

But, think for a minute about what your bushel basket might really look like.

Maybe your bushel basket looks like a recliner. I mean, it's so easy, isn't it? To just get home from work, get comfortable, get in the recliner, start flipping channels on the TV and know that there is someone who could use a call or a visit.

But, well, you've worked hard all day. This is a time to rewind. Nothing wrong with that. Except ... if the Spirit is nudging you to go and you don't. Then, that recliner becomes the bushel basket that hides your light.

Or maybe it's your work; your career that is important and is all consuming. Your focus is on that and that only. You realize your life is out of balance with all the stress and pressure, but it's important to be able to get ahead. There are things you wish you could do to help others but that is going to have to wait.

Of course it could be a hobby or a sport you love. These are all good things. But they *can* be the bushel basket that hides your light – that keeps the light of Christ mostly hidden and because of that, we also are not sharing his love.

Perhaps the biggest basket of all is the one that looks like fear. I think that's what my dad's basket was. Fear of sounding foolish, fear of being embarrassed. Fear of feeling inadequate.

I think we have fear of going to visit someone who is sick or dying because we don't know what to say. We are afraid that we will say something offensive or cause them to be upset. We are afraid that we won't have *anything* to say. So, we sometimes decide to not act; to hope someone else does it. In that way, we do have the light, but we hide it under the bushel basket of fear.

Remember, Jesus is on this mountain teaching his disciples with the multitude of people listening in. He is sitting down – a sign of authority in his time. Jesus is serious about what discipleship looks like.

As much as we like to sing the song "This Little Light of Mine, I'm going to let it shine ..." Jesus' teaching us so much more.

Think about it. If Jesus' followers did not consider how important it is to reflect the light of the one we call Savior, there would be so many people in the world who would not know him; who would hunger for him but have no real sense of who or what they were hungry for.

And if we withheld our light – his light – it also would mean that his love was not being carried out. It would mean that people would miss out on the greatest love that ever existed in the past, that is today, and will be into eternity.

Today, we have lit the candle of love, the Christmas light that brings love and healing, forgiveness and grace. You, my friends are a part of that important mission. You are a light. Jesus said it, so you can believe it.

Don't hide it under whatever your bushel basket is. Together, our lights are a force that makes a huge difference in a world that still has darkness and pain.

Follow his light. Be a light for him. Pay attention to where the Holy Spirit leads you to shine and then just do it. You will be blessed and you will be a blessing.

Amen.

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