

The Message for Sunday, October 10, 2010

Title: “Living a Chiaroscuro Kind of Life”

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:8-13

I. Chiaroscuro... In the 1800’s, it was popular for print makers to reproduce the works of the masters in a format that could be sold to the public. They hired expert artists to make etchings and engravings of famous works that could be printed and sold. While I was in graduate school, I was fortunate enough to be able to add one of these to my collection of antique art. Now, hanging in my office there is a late 18th Century reproduction of a Rembrandt (1606-1669) entitled, “Elijah Raising the Widow’s Son.”

Almost everything I learned about antique art, I learned from an art dealer in Nashville by the name of John Sharp. And, John used the print I bought from him to teach me about a technique called, “chiaroscuro.”

Chiaroscuro is the method of using strong contrasts between dark and light. Rembrandt was a master at it. In the print that I have, there is a lot of dark at the edges with the center of the portrait being much lighter.

II. A hymn... The passage from 2 Timothy is a little like a scriptural chiaroscuro. It is a strong contrast between dark and light. In this scripture, Paul reminded the reader that he had endured all of his suffering so that everyone who would believe might be able to obtain the eternal glory that comes with salvation. That, in itself, is a contrast: Suffering versus the glory of eternal salvation. But to further illustrate his point, Paul then gives some verse.

The lines of this ancient verse look like the words of an ancient Christian hymn. And after a little study, what was surprising to me, at least, was to realize that Paul was not merely quoting a contemporary Christian hymn of the 1st Century A. D. Instead, these are Paul’s composition. Although it is partially covered up by the necessity of the translation into English, the ancient Greek is Paul’s style and Paul’s vocabulary.

I learned many years ago, first in undergraduate school, and then in seminary that Paul took special care to write to his audience using words, phrases, and illustrations that his listeners used and understood. That he chose to communicate with a hymn confirms what the church has long known: Hymns teach, and they have a profound impact on our lives.

III. The power of a hymn... (1) I remember a story that Betty Masters told me and Dee. Many, many years ago, she and her husband, Doyle, were appointed to Smyrna. According to Betty, there was a person in that congregation who had the habit of coming to church at the beginning of a pastor’s tenure and looking for something he might find objectionable; and then, he would use that as an excuse to stay away for the rest of the time that person was his pastor.

At the reception welcoming the Masters family to the church, Betty found herself confronted by this somewhat hostile parishioner. He started to complain about Betty’s shoes. They were red. Many of you do not know Betty, but she is extremely positive

and bubbly. Immediately she quipped, “It’s scriptural.” When this man looked puzzled, Betty quoted, “Brighten the corner where you are.”

It is not exactly scriptural. It is actually from an old Gospel hymn. In 1913, faced with the disappointment of not being able to pastor a small circuit of churches because she had to stay home to care for her sick father, Ina D. Ogdon wrote the hymn, “Brighten the Corner Where You Are.” (Music by Charles Gabriel. The hymn is in public domain.)

When Betty offered that quote, it won the fellow over, and he became a loyal member of the congregation. Years later, Doyle was called back to preach his funeral. And, this is the first thing I want to say. Hymns have the power to speak a strong message, even to the hardest of hearts.

Surely, by now you are familiar with my fondness for hymns. The first car I took to college had no air conditioning. To keep from sweltering, I rolled down all of the windows and drove as fast as the law allowed. Because of the rush of wind, I could not hear the radio. So, I used the time to sing hymns—some of which I made up as I drove along. For several years, I serenaded the cows and pigs all the way from Tusculumbia to Birmingham.

Some of you also know about my Beulah Land experience. Once, when baking pecan pies for a church supper in Nashville, the huge baking sheet slipped, and five sticky, gooey pecan pies slid off the baking sheet and onto the door of the hot oven, ultimately dripping onto the floor. The fellow helping me looked at me expecting, perhaps, to hear something else. But, I broke out into a spirited version of “Beulah Land.”

Paul knew that his letters would be read. But, Paul also knew that a hymn would speak to hearts in a way that no mere sentence could speak. Christian hymns are important vehicles for carrying the Gospel message. Paul wrote a hymn that helps convey what he was trying to say about Christ. And, that leads me to the second thing I want to say.

IV. An important message... (2) Paul’s short hymn for Timothy has a very important message. The message is composed in such a way as to make a point. Paul says, “If we have died with him (meaning Christ), we will also live with him.” And then he says, “...if we endure, we will also reign [with Christ].” Continuing, Paul says, “If we deny Christ, he will deny us.” Then Paul concludes with, “Even if we are faithless, God will be faithful to us.”

Perhaps we need a word of explanation here. The last two lines seem to be contradictory. First it says that if we deny Christ, He will deny us; and then it is immediately followed by the statement that Christ is faithful even to the less faithful.

There is a difference between denying Christ and just being less faithful. Being less faithful refers to the Christian who allows other things to interrupt his or her walk with Christ. At some time or another, most Christians become distracted by the things of the world and by the human passions of the heart.

For example, it does not mean that we deny Christ if we simply choose to be lazy on a Sunday morning and skip church. It just means we have let our discipline slip. But, to

deny Christ means rejecting Christ. That is a much stronger action. It does not just imply laziness or distraction. It means intentionally dismissing Christ from our life.

For example, it is one thing to remain silent when you are present while someone disputes the Christian faith and the mission of the Church. It is another thing, altogether to join in the rejection of Christ and His plan of salvation.

The first two lines of the hymn reinforce this by affirming that when we stick in there with Christ, we will eventually emerge victorious with Christ. And, that leads me to the third thing I want to say.

V. Darkness around... (3) There is a little book by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre entitled, *Drawn to the Light*. It is a collection of poems on Rembrandt's religious paintings; and it is well illuminated with examples of Rembrandt's works. In the introduction, Mrs. McEntyre reminds us that like the people he painted, Rembrandt lived in the shadows. There were those long Dutch winters; and of course, there was sickness, death and problems all around him, including his own. Many mothers died in childbirth; the infant mortality rate was high; and the recollections of The Plague were not all that distant. It kept reoccurring, particularly during Rembrandt's lifetime in the 17th Century.

Many of Rembrandt's contemporaries painted about the glories of this world, especially all of the fabulous luxuries the Dutch merchants were able to provide with ever increasing naval and navigational technology. But, Rembrandt chose to paint in a different way. Using the method of chiaroscuro, he painted the things of this world in the shadows and let the people of his paintings live in the light. (Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Drawn to the Light: Poems on Rembrandt's Religious Paintings*, Eerdmans [Grand Rapids], 2003, p. 11)

That is the way we go about living much of our lives: surrounded by darkness. Our lives are a living canvas in which life comes in the contrast between light and dark. From over 40 years of being ordained and in ministry, I know something of the kinds of darkensses in which people live.

This is no one in particular, because I have heard it so many times. There is a spouse who is living not only in the darkness, but in the nightmare of abuse—sometimes physical, and more often verbal. The spouse is fearful to say anything, sometimes even do something as simple as turn on a light for fear that the other spouse will erupt in a rage and torment of harsh and condemning language. Often, this is not limited just to a spouse, but to children, or even elderly parents.

In other situations, it also involves the sudden move of the hand in delivering a blow. Either way, physical or verbal and emotional, abuse is a darkness from which many people wish and pray they could escape.

This is no one in particular, because I have seen it so many times. There are those who are living in the shadow of the valley of death. There is someone who is loved and is about to pass away; or some loved one has been lost. Sometimes, this casts a darkness around us that almost seems to suck the life out of our hearts and souls.

Again, this is no one in particular, because I have seen it so many times. There is someone who is living in the dark shadow of addiction. One of the great flaws in the human fabric is that most of us are susceptible to some kind of addiction.

The one time in college my roommate and I thought we ought to see what this alcohol thing was all about, I discovered that inebriation was not for me. And, I have never, ever, even tried an illegal substance. But, I have never met a French fry I did not like. I struggle with my fondness for food. It is, indeed, the long arm extending from a dark shadow called obesity that beckons me constantly.

Your addiction may not involve harmful substances, but it may have something to do with pornography, or gambling, or shoplifting, or infidelity. These are some pretty dark shadows that crowd our lives.

In addition, I have no one particular person in mind when I mention the problems that lurk in the dark corners of our home life. Darkness quickly falls on a living room, breakfast table, or den when someone says, “I want a divorce,” or “You are not fulfilling my needs.” For others, the darkness is called “loneliness.” For still others it has something to do with finances, or problems with children. Never, in all of my nearly-sixty-three years have I ever encountered so much wide-spread hostility between children and parents.

I could go on and on, but I think I have painted the picture with enough darkness. Do not tell me it is not there. If not in your life at this moment, it has been. And, if not in your life at this moment, it is in the life of someone you love. Darkness is all around us.

VI. Right now!... Jesus said that to those such as children belongs the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:14). I recently read of a letter a six-year-old wrote as a Sunday School assignment. This is what she wrote: “Dear God, We read that Thomas Edison made light, but in Sunday school they said you did. I bet he stole your idea. Sincerely, Donna.” (“The Parable of the Blackest Stuff on Earth,” from *Matthew 21:33-46*, 10/5/2008, www.homileticonline.com)

Donna was right. Thomas Edison (1847-1931) did not invent light. He only invented the incandescent light bulb. God created light—and dark, by the way. And, it is important to note that light does not destroy dark—because dark is also a part of God’s first act of creation. And yet, it is also important to note something else that the Bible tells us. The first thing God did was to separate the light from the dark.

In Matthew, Jesus says “...the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the ... shadow of death, light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16). And then, in the beginning of his Gospel, John says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). What this means is that the darkness will never overcome the light. Practically put, this means that if you are now having to live a part of your life on the edge where the dark is, Christ will help you move to the center where the light is—and where God intended us to live our lives.

If there is someone in your home who abuses you, I ask God—right now—to bring you into the light so that you can live a life that is free from fear.

If death is casting a shadow over you I ask God, right now, to bring you into the light so that you can know death holds no dark victory over a Christian. Did not the psalmist

say, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want... even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death”? (Psalm 23)

If you are struggling with addiction in some dark cave of existence, I ask God—right now—to open your mind and heart to the light of Christ so that you can see His path to sober and responsible living.

And, if any number of home problems are pulling you into life’s shadows: Infidelity, children, loneliness, whatever, I ask God—right now—to lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

Our lives might be surrounded by shadows, but with the help of Christ, we live in the light! Amen.

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