

Learning to Walk in the Dark

Matthew 21:33-46; Philipians 3:4b-14

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 8, 2017

I have developed a new ~~obsession~~ “hobby” over the past month. It all started as we were preparing our basement guest room for the arrival of Prince, a student from South Africa who was hoping to come to BC for the start of the fall semester and was planning to live with us. As it so happened, Prince was not able to make it for the fall semester, so our guest room at the moment remains unoccupied. However, in the process of cleaning out the closets in what will eventually be his room, I had to move about two shelves full of the old remnants of candles. For the past ten years, I’ve been stashing the leftovers from all the pillars, jars, votives, and even tealight candles that we burned in our home on those shelves, with the intention of recycling them to make new candles. Since I had to move them all anyway, I decided it was time to either make good on my intentions or just trash them.

So it came to pass that I have become an amateur candle maker over the past month. And I have to tell you that after a few misfires in getting started, I was feeling pretty good about my crafting accomplishments. In just a few weeks, I had a collection of maybe 10-12 candles of various sizes. I was especially stoked about the large three wick jar candles I had made. I got the idea from the internet, where I had found some handy “how-to” sites with ideas and instructions. Each of these candles had multiples stripes of various colors, created by adding an old crayon or two to the melted wax of each layer. They were beautiful, and better yet, the only part of them that wasn’t made from recycled materials was the wicks. I’m not ashamed to say that I was really proud of them.

There was only one problem. They didn’t work; at least not as long as they should. When I finally put a lighter to the wicks, they only produced a flame for about a half hour, give or take a few minutes for each wick. After that, they burn out, and nothing much can be done to fix them without starting over. Since first encountering the problem, I have tried a number of fixes – digging out the wicks or cutting them longer, using a different kind of wick, cutting out an entire layer of colored wax, using different methods of warming the wax – all to no avail. Currently, I am thinking that it might be the crayons I’ve been trying to use for pigment, but I no longer have any candle remnants left that haven’t been touched by the crayolas. So I will have to wait awhile to test that theory.

Obviously, these candles have been on my mind over the last few weeks as I began thinking about this sermon. But it took me a while to realize that they actually made a pretty good metaphor for some of the themes of the scriptures for this week. Consider Matthew’s “Parable of the Wicked Tenants.” It is actually a direct allusion to Isaiah 5, where the prophet sings about a vineyard that failed to yield the produce that was expected of it, and was then allowed to be trampled down and overgrown. Isaiah makes his allegory clear – “the vineyard ...is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his...planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”¹ In our gospel text for today, Jesus alludes to this story, but adds a twist – it is not the vineyard that fails – it is the tenants that were meant to tend it. Either way – the one who plants the vineyard doesn’t get what he expects to get, and the vineyard fails to yield the expected return on investment. Like my good-looking, but ultimately anemic candles, the vineyard was not fulfilling its purpose.

¹ Isaiah 5:7. *NRSV*

Or what about the section we read today from Paul's letter to the Philippians? Paul describes his stellar resume as a Pharisee – he was about as top-notch as you could get, with the pedigree and education, the charisma and the character of one who could be proud of his religiosity. But he writes that because of Christ, he has come to regard all of that as rubbish. Actually, that English word doesn't really convey the contempt with which Paul looks at the distinctions of his former life as Saul the Pharisee. The Greek word he used is probably better – though not as delicately – translated in the King James English, which renders it “dung.” I know a couple of other 4-letter words that Paul may or may not have objected to using, but which surely carry a similar meaning. In fact, it was just these words which I may or may not have used when I discovered how worthless my beautiful candles were at actually being candles.

Now this is where I find resonance in these stories with my candles. It is clear that what I have done up to this point has not worked – as good as the candles may have looked at first, they didn't burn, and thus they are essentially worthless. Both of our scriptures speak of similar situations. The vineyard of which Matthew's Jesus speaks is in desperate need of new management. And Paul names explicitly the worthlessness of all that he had spent most of his life pursuing.

It is dark stuff for sure. And in both scriptures, there is a glimmer of hope, but it doesn't come the way most of us hope it would. In neither text is the darkness outshone by the light. Rather, the light and the hope come on the other side of the darkness. Like the dawn, it is only arrived at on the other side of twilight. More on that later.

Now I am using darkness as a metaphor here, but I am trusting that we all know what I mean. For Paul, it started with the realization that his lifetime of religiosity was worthless – that he had essentially been doing it wrong all along. But it didn't stop there – after all, Paul was writing this letter from the darkness of a prison cell. He was certainly a man well acquainted with suffering. For Jesus, it was the retelling of an age-old tale – the fruits of the kingdom being mishandled and wasted, religious authorities doing violence to the prophets of God – all the while knowing that not only his message but he himself would be rejected and abused at their behest.

For me, darkness implies absence – the absence of light, the absence of sight, and thus the absence of confidence for moving forward. I remember an experience once when I was at Shepherd's Spring Camp. If my memory serves me correctly, I was actually on staff, which is a bit embarrassing, given what I am about to share with you. At any rate, I was one of a couple of counselors in this group. We had been at an evening program at the lodge, which was roughly a quarter mile hike through the woods from our cabins. We had neglected to bring flashlights, and so when it came time to return to our cabins at bedtime, we were facing a fairly long journey through darkness. I started out down the path in the lead, with the campers in my cabin stretched out in a line between me and the other counselor in the rear. For a little while, all was well, as the familiar path and the ambient light from the lodge guided me forward. But it was an exceptionally dark night, and pretty soon, I began to lose my nerve, and eventually, I froze. I couldn't, or at least I wouldn't go any further, especially not in the lead. Simply put – I got scared stiff. I lost my confidence, and thus my ability to move forward.

Fortunately, the other counselor in our group was a more experienced night hiker than I, and when it became apparent what was going on, he very graciously switched places with me and took the lead without fanfare. He proceeded to lead us through the darkness, slowly but surely, talking us through the journey, and giving us pointers on how to navigate our way. And our walk through the dark became an adventure. I especially remember his inviting us to feel the path beneath our feet, and to be quiet enough to listen to the sounds of our footsteps. He was leading us through the darkness, but he was also beginning to teach us how to navigate it ourselves.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her 2014 book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (from which I took the title for this sermon), writes:

“darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me – that I want no part of – either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of the polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love – if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.²

As a leader in this faith community, I find that I often just want to find those right night-lights to turn on. That has certainly been the case this week. I do not want to take the lead in a journey through the dark. But if I have learned anything since that dark hike through the woods at camp, it is that there are times when you just don’t have any light to offer. And in such moments, the best you can do is to take a deep breath and set out on the path through the darkness – one step at a time.

I recently read an article from PBS originally published about a year and a half ago about the faith of former Vice President Joe Biden.³ It recounted how he frequently acknowledged that it was only his faith that enabled him to endure the untimely death of his son, Beau. It spoke of how his wife had taped a quote from the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard to his mirror: “Faith sees best in the dark.” That quote, which has provided such sustenance to Mr. Biden heads our bulletin today in its expanded form, and can be found in Kierkegaard’s 1847 book, *Uplifting Discourses in Various Spirits*, in a section of text entitled “The Gospel of Suffering.” The paragraph from which Biden cites reads:

“The believer humanly comprehends how heavy the suffering is, but in faith’s wonder that it is beneficial to him, he devoutly says: It is light. Humanly he says: It is impossible, but he says it again in faith’s wonder that what he humanly cannot understand *is* beneficial to him. In other words, when sagacity *is* able to perceive the beneficialness, then faith cannot see God; but when in the dark night of suffering sagacity cannot see a handbreadth ahead of it, then faith can see God, since **faith sees best in the dark.**”

The author of the article goes on to reflect:

² pp. 4-5

³ Gordon Marino: “Faith Sees Best in the Dark.” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. March 30, 2016. Available on PBS.org <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2016/03/30/gordon-marino-faith-sees-best-dark/29685/>

There are many ways to interpret this tissue of thought, but a few pages before this paragraph, Kierkegaard observes "...faith always pertains to what is not seen, be it the *invisible* or the *improbable*." The benefits are easily intelligible when the love of your life accepts your marriage proposal and you have just landed the job of your dreams. In such sunny times, it does not require faith to discern the blessings of life.

Human understanding, however, cannot find anything good in the death of a son. In that obsidian night, sagacity is blind to goodness.

Though his entire life was a meditation on the Christian faith, Kierkegaard was no dew-eyed believer. He reminds his reader "it is not true that the Christian is exempted from human sufferings," and when those sufferings are at your threshold, when the earthquakes of life rumble and there are no worldly advantages to point to, then neither the senses nor the mind can discern anything beneficial. In that darkness, **faith sees best...**⁴

Now I have to be honest that, at first, all this sounds a bit thin to me – the PBS and theological equivalent of a Sunday School answer, where you know that the answer is prayer, read the Bible, and Jesus . But then I remember that this is coming via someone who lost his son, and who has maintained his faith by holding on to this teaching. And I remember that it is not just Biden or Kierkegaard who holds this to be true, but countless saints through the generations. And so I must also accept that sometimes, though I might have no light to offer, such concepts might offer a word of courage for entering the darkness of the night, and pressing on toward the goal as Paul modeled for us.

Which brings me back to my candles. How do I fix them? Can they be fixed?

I don't know.

But I am going to keep trying.

Maybe that is what faith is really about after all...

⁴ Ibid.