

Sermon August 28, 2022 – Rev. Brian Walton

When my great aunt died she left me a small inheritance. Victoria and I were just emerging from a combined eleven years of university with the accompanying attention to budgeting. Suddenly we were the recipients of this wonderful gift and so we decided to take a trip overseas to the British Isles. During our visit to Britain, we stayed in a few ‘bed and breakfasts’. One morning, while sharing breakfast with some English travellers, one of them happened to ask what my occupation was. I explained that I was a minister in the United Church of Canada. It took a few seconds for the inquirer to compute that this bearded 27-year-old traveller was a church worker. As the realization finally settled, she blurted out in surprise, “So you’re a vicar!” In an instant I saw her demeanour change and I saw her discomfort. In the early eighties an encounter with a ‘vicar’ could produce guilt or defensiveness on the part of some other. Over the years I experienced many such moments although the response seems to have changed from guilt and defensiveness to that of bewilderment and mistrust.

Our tour of the British Isles continued and a few days later we signed up for a tour of a Welsh castle where we would participate in a Middle Ages feast to be eaten with our fingers. We found ourselves amidst a group of

spirited companions and, at the end of the entertainment, our new friends suggested we go to the local pub. On route one of them asked the predictable question, “so what do you do back in Canada?” In that moment I took the proverbial basket which Jesus described in this morning’s scripture and pulled it down over my head declaring that I was an adult educator. I justified to myself that Presbyterians call their clergy ‘teaching elders’ so I wasn’t completely off the mark. Of course, that was nothing but a rationalization for being a charlatan.

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus declares: “You are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts in under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others ...” I have to confess that in the last few years I have been increasingly inclined to don the bushel basket not wanting to be associated with those who claim to be ‘Christian.’

In recent times we have been exposed to one of the most corrupt leaders in the Western world who is hailed by so-called Christians as their president and saviour. In my google search of why Christians support Donald Trump I discovered an article authored by a ‘religion writer’ named Steven Andrew who concludes that: “God has raised up and is using President Trump” Among his ‘top ten list’ of reasons God chose Trump are

that 1) Trump obeys God by affirming the U.S. as a Christian nation; 2) Trump is working to end the military's transgender sin; 3) Trump wants to protect America's borders from all manner of 'foreigners'. Andrews seems oblivious to Trump's corrupt business practices, his misogyny towards women; and his endless litany of falsehoods, not the least of which that he won the last election.

This year Canadians have been awakened to the reality that the Trump phenomenon is not contained to America. The so-called freedom convoy was endorsed by many in Canada's Christian right complete with regular prayer breakfasts. This group also seemed to turn a blind eye to those in their midst urinating on a war memorial, espousing Nazi and white nationalist slogans, and unapologetically holding an entire city hostage in the name of freedom. Equally disturbing are the actions of desperate politicians' including Pierre Poilievre and Scott Moe, among others, who openly or tacitly supported these actions. If being Christian means supporting such dangerous and anti-democratic agendas, then give me a bushel basket.

Hiding under a bushel basket also seems apt in light of the realities named by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the last year it has been confirmed that not only did those claiming to be Christian

participate in the physical and sexual abuse of children, but also kept secret the death of countless children whose bodies are only now being unearthed. The reality that our not-so-distant Christian ancestors participated in and justified colonialism's goal of cultural genocide makes me say again, give me a bushel basket.

And now, in recent weeks, we learn that in our own city those claiming the identity of 'Christian' paddled and demeaned children, berated adolescents for exploring their gender identity, and advocated 'shunning' as a way to discipline children and their families. Is there any hope of salvaging the identity of 'Christian?' Not only am I tempted to scurry under a bushel basket but to blow out the candle entirely lest anyone associate me with this litany of abominations. In today's passage Jesus cautions: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is to be thrown out and trampled under foot."

Of course, Jesus was not a Christian but a sage, an elder and a mystic of the Jewish tradition who saw the flaws of his own religion and attempted to live beyond them by imagining a commonwealth where people are called to be their brother (and sister's) keeper (perhaps by wearing a mask) and where inquisitive children are not shunned but brought forward

to sit upon his knee. Jesus didn't ask us to be Christians but rather disciples of The Way. Jesus himself never advocated the building of churches but rather the formation of loving and inclusive communities. It is interesting to me that the United Church which raised, nurtured and ordained me is also reflecting on its life as an institution. In recent years there has been a quiet but persistent move to redefine organizations such as McClure no longer as churches but as communities of faith. Like the word 'Christian,' the word 'church' has become ambiguous representing a place of welcome for some and a place of oppression for others. The moniker of 'Communities of faith' implies that we gather in cooperation and mutual support informed by faith in The Way envisioned by a first century Jewish mystic.

Throughout our history of being the United Church of Canada there have consistently been those among us who have identified firstly as followers of the Way and disciples of Jesus. We recall some of their names. Lydia Gruchy seeking to be a disciple of Jesus, in an early act of gender equality, convinced the church to ordain her its first woman clergy in 1936. Lydia Gruchy did not hide under a bushel basket. Disciples of Jesus like Al Forrest, one time editor of the church's magazine the Observer, recognized the plight of displaced Palestinians as early as 1973 and

despite rampant criticism from conservative quarters initiated what has been an ongoing advocacy of justice for Palestinians. Al Forest did not hide under a bushel basket. As early as 1986 a disciple named Bob Haverluck, on staff at the Prairie Christian Training Centre, convinced the church to apologize to Indigenous People for its part in colonization, a recognition which continued to 1998 with another apology and deeper apology for its role in Indian residential schools. Bob Haverluck did not hide under a bushel basket. Other disciples within the church followed the Way of Jesus condemning apartheid in South Africa; declaring that all, regardless of orientation, are full members of the community; and petition to this day for a guaranteed annual income as a way out of poverty. Thank God for those who have thrown off the bushel basket and let their light shine, even in opposition to the prevailing winds, so that the Way of Jesus might be known in the world. I am so grateful to this community of faith which raised me and tutored me in the way of Jesus and still calls out for 'Salty Christians.' Indeed, if this is what it means to be Christian then cast off the bushel basket, relight the candle, name the apostasy of those who advance hatred and division in the name of Christ. Let our light shine.

Before Jesus calls his disciples to be salt and light he reminds the crowd who is blessed in the commonwealth of God. 'Blessed are the poor,'

he says, 'Blessed are the meek, those who hunger, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.' I do not find the Trumps or the Putins in this list. I do not find those who want to control women's bodies or dictate who we love in this list. I do not find those who amass wealth or yearn for power at the expense of others, in this list. Jesus concludes the beatitudes by declaring, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

Tossing off the bushel basket and lighting a candle may not be easy. It may require us to challenge our family members or our neighbours. It may require us to name racism and classism and sexism for what it is. It may require us to call out the fallacy of individualism and personal freedom in the name of Jesus. We must be willing to declare, 'That's not my Jesus' when those with exclusionary and self-interested agendas want to coopt the gospel of love for the purpose of power. It is not enough to know 'about' God. As disciples, we have to be the activity of God in the world. We are called to live out our identity as salt and light. It may require big things of us or it may, like the words of that old children's hymn ask us simply to shine, "you in your small corner and I in mine."

It's about time that I address my embarrassment at being called a Christian and commit to being transparent about wanting the Way of Jesus

to guide my life. What about you? Do you have to cast off a bushel basket? Do you have a candle that needs to be relit for justice, truth and love? We may find that we have more in common with justice seekers and commonwealth builders than those who want to claim Christ as the personal saviour of the upwardly mobile, white, and sys gendered. Remember Jesus said, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the commonwealth of God." In that vein I turn to the words of an Indigenous sage and writer Richard Wagamese who, speaking from his tradition, renews the call to be light in the world.

Creator does not ask us to kill because of religion. She asks us to live in the cause of Spirit. Loving Kindness. Kindle it today. Love your neighbour as yourselves. Darkness cannot abide the light.

What Comes from Spirit: Richard Wagamese

PRAYER

Creator of the Universe, Source of the Sun, You are the light of the world. Today we come in awe and wonder, in humility and petition. Today we pause in awe at the wonder and complexity of your creation:

- T-cells working to keep our bodies healthy
- Photosynthesis helping plants release oxygen and transform into food
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging helping us explore the complexities of our bodies
- The James Webb Telescope taking human understanding further and further into space; and the Synchrotron helping us explore the minutia of matter
- For the natural wonders and the products of human ingenuity we stand in wonder with gratitude

Yet we struggle to understand how the ability to understand and create these marvels have not led us deeper into love. We pray for love

- To transform all kinds of war into peace
- To awaken abusers and controllers to the harm they do
- To foster cooperation such that the worlds goods are no longer hoarded and that all can eat and find shelter
- To console the worries that beset so many creating anxiety and depression and deep loneliness
- To teach us to know the love you have for us that we might truly love ourselves

God help us to shine with hope and justice amidst the people and places near to us. Might your activity BE our activity in the world. May all peoples of the world, regardless of whatever name they call you, make Love the priority of their living.